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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.000101b0>

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Naomi Nixon – Good and Bad Women in the Bible

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**A thesis submitted to the Open University
for the degree of BPhil:**

Good and Bad Women in the Bible

Theology and Religious Studies

December 2004

Sponsoring establishment: St John's Nottingham

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Abstract

This study considers the division of women in the Bible into either ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’. This dichotomy obscures the fact that real women are a mixture of good and bad, and thus female readers of the Bible are denied realistic female role models and may be perceived as either ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’ in the same way that biblical women are. Four women who display elements of this trend are analysed in detail, both in their stories and in the interpretation of those stories.

Ruth is a heroine in her story and clearly her role must be that of a ‘Good’ woman. However, the demands of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ woman dichotomy mean she is cast as pure and unphysical since she is good. Her extraordinary assertiveness is reread as loyalty, her sexual forwardness becomes innocent obedience, and her pragmatism is interpreted as faith.

Gomer, wife of the prophet Hosea, is confused with Israel, the errant wife of God, in both the text and in commentary on it. Her own story is stifled as a result, and her humanity is exchanged for symbolism. Her guilt is paraded, while her extraordinary husband is compared to God.

Jephthah’s daughter is the nameless child who is sacrificed to complete a bargain. She is an unusual heroine but nevertheless her silence is called obedience and her death is celebrated as a national festival, yet her name is forgotten.

Delilah is the villainess of Samson's story who defeats this strong leader from Israel and hence is a 'Bad' woman. Delilah's victory seals her reputation: her frank questioning is called wily; her nationality is assumed to be that of the enemy and she is cast as the seductress extraordinaire, even though the text is silent about her sexuality.

The polarised conclusions of commentators analysed in this study are shown often to be simplistic or far-fetched. The study concludes by asserting the belief that the acknowledgement of the complex nature of these biblical women would help Christian women accept the complexities within themselves.

Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Good girls go to heaven,
Bad girls go everywhere’¹

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead
When she was good she was very very good
And when she was bad she was horrid²

Starting Points

According to Angela West, the year 1975 was the high water mark of second wave feminism’s influence on public life.³ West is referring to the women’s movement’s strong links with the governing Labour party and, in particular, the triumph of the passing of The Sexual Discrimination Act (1975).

I was born in 1975. I grew up with my generation’s presumptions concerning what we could do with our lives, which was pretty much anything. I spent my formative years not giving any particular thought to my gender because the law had, in my understanding, made men and

¹ Steinman (1993).

² Unattributed, *Dean’s Gift Book of Nursery Rhymes* (1965) p12.

women equal. I had never thought about being a woman in relation to my faith either. When I was a child I remember my Father saying ‘there will be women priests by the time you’re grown up’. He was no campaigner; he was just stating an opinion. He was right; before I was 18 there were women priests in the Church of England. I remember seeing the TV coverage and being glad the women won, but not being surprised; women can do anything and be anything; it isn’t a big deal.

One of West’s complaints is that modern women are apathetic to the feminist cause. I used to think this was actually a good thing. Once, women had to fight for their rights, now we can take them for granted in the same way as men do. I used to think the aim of feminism was to bring about a situation whereby we didn’t have to be conscious about our gender, we could just get on with ordinary living.

Then I saw how we, as Christian women in this country and context at least, couldn’t get on with being ‘ordinary’, because we have little idea of what being an ordinary Christian woman really means. ‘Ordinary’ suggests something about what real women are generally like, who they really are and how they live. Christian women are offered little by way of role models from the Bible that relate to the reality of their so-called ‘ordinary’ lives.

I believe, as do many feminist theologians, that beneath the façade of equality we have deep rooted problems to face up to as Christian women. We have colluded with some of the things that cause us pain and with some of the things that fragment our relationship with God.⁴

³ West (1995) p20.

The problem that I wish to focus on is that somewhere buried in our culture there appears to be a mythical presumption about the nature of women, a presumption that they are *either* ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’. The moment when this really came home to me was in a hermeneutics class at theological college in 1999 when we were discussing sexuality in the Bible. It was a mixed group, though the majority were male, and it was the men who spoke passionately about the injustice in the scripture we were examining. The text was Numbers 5:11-31 in which the ritual for establishing a wife’s guilt concerning adultery is laid out. The ritual invokes a curse if the woman has committed adultery. The curse is that she will not be able to have children if she is guilty. If she is found guilty she will be punished. The men’s response to this piece of scripture startled me, and troubled me. I noted down verbatim one phrase a colleague used: ‘A woman isn’t like that, a woman is to be honoured’. Since then, often I have thought about what he said. It is easy to take the excess of a remark when it is in our favour; what kind of person rails against being ‘honoured’? But if that extract of scripture is unfair, is it because women are the opposite to the degraded woman of Numbers 5, and are in fact alabaster statues on a pedestal, good and pure and honourable? Or is it unfair, because no woman can be such an extreme? Whatever she has done, violating her cannot be excused. It seems clear to me that the latter is the case: like men, women are a mixture of the good and virtuous and the bad and shameful. I believe that accepting the image of the ‘Good’ woman is as binding and damaging as allowing the ‘Bad’ woman to be part of our consciousness. We will never live up to the ‘Good’ woman, and if we have no middle ground we can therefore only read our human flaws as making us irredeemably ‘Bad’.

⁴ I have noted my personal starting points on the relevant issues to both acknowledge my own bias and explain where the desire to undertake study came from.

The ‘Good’ Woman

The ‘Good’ woman in popular culture is often put on a pedestal, praised and adored. This woman is a popular device in contemporary storytelling, an ethereal presence that saves the man from the excesses of his own character. She appears in various forms in films. A classic example is in the film *The Unforgiven*⁵ where the wild assassin is kept in tamed domesticity by the memory of a good dead wife.

In the popular perception of real people, there has been an inclination by people and the media to deify Diana Princess of Wales and forget her humanity after her death. We might consider this to be indicative of the desire to have female icons who can inspire such devotion. Had she lived no doubt the pendulum of positive and negative press would have continued and at times the public would have continued to devour details of her sex life with relish and open criticism. Whilst alive, Diana was criticized or patronized for her attempts to assert herself, in death she is referred to as a guiding light, a model to emulate.

One consequence of this adoration is that the ‘Good’ woman gains the qualities of sainthood and loses the qualities of personhood or womanhood. Her influence becomes wholly spiritual and is distanced from her bodily presence.

The ‘Bad’ Woman

The ‘Bad’ woman in popular culture may be vilified. If she forgoes her goodness in any way she may lose it wholly. Removed from the pedestal what is left is a monster who may be jeered at or feared. She is put outside the community of respectable society. She often appears

in films as the seductive villainess. A good example is the film *Disclosure*:⁶ where the central female character's assertiveness drives the action but she is the enemy of the good father and husband who is presented as an honest, though flawed, man.

In real life the 'Bad' woman may be less glamorous and presented by the media as grotesque. Myra Hindley is still considered one of British history's most notorious criminals despite the length of time since her crimes, being only an accessory to murder, and the number of murders being fewer than several less widely known serial killers. The infamy and hatred of Hindley remain in the popular consciousness even beyond her death and take little account of what she did or did not do. She is a woman who helped kill children and so she was a wicked freak of nature, incapable of reform. Each time she reappeared in the news, usually in an attempt to appeal her sentence she reinscribed her crimes. Failing to disappear in a tasteful fashion she asserted herself with pleas for redemption that were stonewalled by an entire society. The abhorrence felt by the British public did not diminish even when she died; the tabloid wish was 'rot in hell'.⁷ Despite her years of repentance, and the gradual disappearance of her male partner in crime from the popular consciousness, there was an unnerving loathing even through to the other side of the grave. 'In no small part, our reaction to Hindley is a paradigm of the one we have towards many women that commit crime. They are caught up in a double bind. They fail to live up to their idealised role as maternal homemakers. At the same time, we are fascinated by their behaviour as they act out our fantasies of risqué femininity.'⁸

⁵ Eastwood (1992).

⁶ Levinson (1994).

⁷ Unattributed, *The Sun* (2002) p36.

⁸ Upton (2000) p6.

The Impact

In everyday life the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman dichotomy challenges women's lives. In legal cases that touch on such issues, perhaps worst of all in rape trials, the societal myths inform the verdict, and so what was an undercurrent of thinking becomes institutionalised perception. Naomi Wolf in her book *Promiscuities* comments directly on the problem of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman. 'Women's sexual past is still used against them to undermine their respectable present.' She adds that when a woman is publicly shamed for her past the result is that all women become a little more inhibited, so sexual harassment goes unchallenged in the workplace, another mother fails to fight for custody of her children and more women recoil from stepping forward to take public roles.⁹

Germaine Greer takes a characteristically provocative look at the problem from the angle of the disembodiment of women in her 2000 book *The Whole Woman*. Women's bodies are talked of, she says, as if they contain at their centre a void, nothingness. Where men's reproductive organs have a thousand slang names that are part of popular language and therefore consciousness, the uterus and ovaries have only their medical titles, as if in the mind of society there was nothing there.¹⁰ The desexualising of women in order to increase power over them is a concept Monica Furlong takes up in *A Dangerous Delight*; it is, she says 'another way of removing women from an active role in the world.'¹¹

The impact of dividing women into 'Good' and 'Bad' seems then, at least from women's perspective, to be that they are disempowered and their wholeness diminished. If women have

⁹ Wolf (1998) pp3-5.

¹⁰ Greer (2000) p48.

¹¹ Furlong (1991) p40.

a physical presence, especially in a way that asserts their sexuality, they are denied a voice as a person worth listening to and considered by themselves and others to be 'Bad'. As their physicality is reduced or suppressed they may retain enough virtue to be 'Good' but they do not have a voice at all because their physical presence has been obliterated.

In Christianity

In the Christian life the challenge is greater still. Not only do we see many examples of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman divide, we struggle to find role models outside the stereotypes in scripture. By contrast male role models allow for a 'flawed hero', failure and redemption in the human relationship with God, David¹² being the primary example in the Old Testament and Peter¹³ in the New. Women have the opportunity to translate the male stories into their own lives of course. However the comparison is not as close as if it were a woman in the centre of the story because that act of translation distances the female reader. The female characters are, I would argue, more powerful models for the way women see themselves. Most of the female characters in the Bible either conform (or are frequently interpreted by preachers and scholars to conform) to the stereotype of 'Good' or 'Bad' women. These women are not flawed human beings; rather they are saints we can never live up to, or harlots we have no wish to be cast as.

Whether biblical interpretation is driven by cultural preconceptions, or our culture has adopted traditional Judeo-Christian models does not really make much difference. At the core of our

¹² The story of David's adultery with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 is an example of a sin for which the story forgives David.

¹³ Peter denies Jesus in Mark 14:66-72 and yet later becomes founder of the church.

faith is redemption and yet the message to women is discordant. We are told we may be whole in Christ yet we are asked to deny parts of ourselves.

In a sense what is said of Gomer in the book of Hosea chapters 1-3, that she is an illustration, is true of all biblical characters. We have only fragments of the stories of people from a society that lived a very long time ago. Their stories were created or recorded to show us something of God. Not to try to tell us the truth about an individual person or character. Therefore they are all illustrations and as such some of the politics of wholeness are forgone in favour of the theology.

However the problem for Christian women, which is at the heart of my study, is that we have been encouraged to take biblical women as role models or warnings rather than theological illustrations. A woman opening the Bible for the first time runs the risk of encountering all sorts of passages that seem to say 'Good' and 'Bad' women are quite distinct, where we would surely prefer she found the message that God offers liberation rather than condemnation.

Some Critical Responses

Many feminist theologians have written about their perspective on the dichotomy of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman. Just a brief look at some of this work takes us through a sweep of biblical characters and touches on doctrinal, ethical, and ecclesiological issues which then are drawn into the fray.

The most obvious examples of 'Good' and 'Bad' women in the Bible are of course Mary and Eve. These women practically define the categories. They are too complex and influence too

much of the Bible for the purposes of this piece of work. I have chosen instead as subjects for this study less well known characters who appear mainly in single sections of the Bible.

However, I will mention Eve and Mary briefly now. Eve is the mother of sin; Mary is the mother of the saviour. Furlong returns to these icons of female behaviour throughout *A Dangerous Delight*. Mary is, she says, puzzling and confusing to women approaching Christianity. The veneration of this woman is a subtle flattery of the female sex and is therefore seductive. The subtext however comes across as: the closer you adhere to the humble, passive chaste and submissive ideal the closer you get to that great flattery being personal. In this way Furlong adds, 'women have sometimes been offered a sort of quasi divinity, a place on a male pedestal'.¹⁴ This is precisely that phenomenon which I commented on in my introduction. In order to save woman from the horrors of harlotry, or what Furlong calls 'The stigma of Eve'¹⁵, she is offered the salvation of aligning herself with a long dead woman, whose spiritual influence is worshipped in lifeless stone.

This stigma of Eve is, according to Furlong, inevitably linked with her role as the first woman to have sex.

It would seem to us now that women, down the centuries, have paid the price not just for the mythical apple, but for what it represents - the discovery of sexuality. It might have been a valuable discovery...had [Christianity] not developed such a strong distaste for 'the flesh'.¹⁶

If I was in any doubt as to the ongoing influence of this tradition I was reminded of the power it still holds when I recently visited a primary school. I was there to be quizzed by a class of nine year olds about Christianity and being a "vicar". One girl asked why the church was not

¹⁴ Furlong (1991) p8.

¹⁵ Furlong (1991) p3.

sure about women vicars and before I could answer a boy shot his hand up and said precisely these words: 'I know, is it because Eve took the apple and so girls are bad?'

Isherwood and Stuart challenge the attitude of Christianity towards the body, basing their argument on the importance of the bodily incarnation of Christ as the route of our salvation and the lived realities, as opposed to merely metaphysical ones, of sin and redemption.¹⁷ They readily acknowledge the problem of women accessing that salvation whilst there is such a rejection of their physical nature.

While Christian tradition may have managed to avoid total collapse into body/soul dualism, the persistent ambiguity towards the body that has haunted the Christian tradition is grounded (at the very least) in an ambiguity towards the female body.¹⁸

Whilst Mary and Eve are the obvious candidates for examining the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman problem, there are many other biblical examples of women portrayed in this polarising way - usually more subtly, but no less powerfully with regard to the response of the female reader.

Both Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* and Exum's *Fragmented Women* focus on the silencing of biblical women. Schüssler Fiorenza opens *In Memory of Her* with an examination of the story of the woman who anoints Jesus - present in all four Gospels: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-49; John 12 1-8. Her interest is sparked by the fact that Jesus states that her act will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached; yet the reality is that she has been written out of the gospel knowledge of Christians. She is largely not remembered. She is

¹⁶ Furlong (1991) p18.

¹⁷ Isherwood and Stuart (1998) p10.

¹⁸ Isherwood and Stuart (1998) p78.

the disciple who recognises Jesus' messiahship and the connection of that to his death (by anointing his head) and yet her name is not even recorded.¹⁹

I would connect her analysis of the lost name and status of the woman in Mark 14 to the assessment of that woman as a good disciple. If the patriarchy Schüssler Fiorenza names insists on the marginalisation of such women, I would argue that this is by the method of dephysicalisation. Women are offered an impossible choice between being good or bad. The choice is then between rejecting her physical nature in order to be good, or simply by asserting word or action being bad. The woman who anoints Jesus has been stripped of her physical nature. The link to the real person is severed by the omission of her name. In spite of Jesus' statement that she will be remembered she is anonymous. The importance of the action is retained for spiritual enlightenment, the identity of the woman is distanced from it. There are relatively so few biblical women we know anything about at all that the treatment of each significant one becomes vital. Such divisions between a woman's spiritual contribution and her identity are inevitably disabling to the female voice and patriarchy marches on undaunted.

Cheryl Exum expresses her perspective on the divide between the 'Good' woman and the 'Bad' woman in her book *Fragmented Women*. From her point of view the patriarchal nature of the biblical narrative mutes or excludes the woman's voice.²⁰ We therefore only have the female perspective in fragments. Exum sees the 'Good' and 'Bad' women emerge as a symptom of this fragmentation in the place of a true reflection of more rounded characters.

¹⁹ Schussler Fiorenza (1983) pxiii.

²⁰ Exum (1993b) p10.

Exum speaks of how Michal asserts herself with deadly consequences.²¹ She gives us an insight into how a woman may step over the boundary from 'Good' to 'Bad'. Michal's assertion of her opinions and feelings seals her fate.²² The Michal character up to this moment has been a classic example of a 'Good' woman. She loves the hero;²³ the hero is pleased as to marry Michal means he will become the king's son in law.²⁴ Michal can add legitimacy to the hero's claim to the throne.²⁵ Later she saves the hero's life and faces her father's wrath alone.²⁶ So Michal is married to David, but there is nothing about the person she is that is required for the marriage. We are told in no uncertain terms that her sister Merab would have performed the function just as well.²⁷ Michal is married for the political reasons of her father and husband.²⁸ However she also has a function in the wider story of the kingship as she signifies the intangible sense of concord between the house of Saul and the house of David that is created by a daughter of Saul marrying David. Furthermore Michal's disappearance and reappearance in the story are solely connected to the desirability of this harmonising symbolism.²⁹ Michal is useful to the purpose of the story and she adds a sweet and sacrificial air. These positive additions to the story are detached from her personhood and I would include this kind of effect in the category of the spiritual influence of the 'Good' woman.

So Michal is a 'Good' woman. She is not, however, remembered as a 'Good' woman. The harmony she is there to create is cut across by her outburst in the street in 2 Sam 6. Michal steps outside the house, literally and metaphorically outside the boundaries of the patriarchal

²¹ Exum (1993b) pp42-60.

²² 2 Samuel 6:16-23.

²³ 1 Samuel 18:20.

²⁴ 1 Samuel 18:26.

²⁵ 1 Samuel 18:28.

²⁶ 1 Samuel 19:11-17.

²⁷ 1 Samuel 18:17.

²⁸ 1 Samuel 18:24, 26.

²⁹ 2 Samuel 3:13.

world. The 'Good' woman asserts her presence and her punishment for this misdemeanour is huge, she becomes, in the eyes of the narrator, a 'Bad' woman, remembered as a nagging wife who failed to worship Yahweh.

Exum contrasts the text's treatment of Michal with that of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11³⁰ whom I will discuss more fully in chapter 4. Like Michal, Jephthah's daughter steps outside the house, the woman's place in these stories. In the same way her step seals her fate, she can never return to the role of the invisible daughter forgotten by the story. Michal lives and is punished. Jephthah's daughter dies, giving up the physical presence that caused a problem. Death preserves her goodness and her purity, and, freed from her physical presence entirely she becomes a positive spiritual influence celebrated through generations.

Where so many feminist theologians have written in an attempt to free women from a burden of guilt Angela West wrote *Deadly Innocence* in an attempt to redress the balance. She asks the question, can women be so very innocent after all? Her perspective of disillusionment with the feminist era she has been a part of adds a negative tone, yet this is really an alternative route to the same conclusion. She points to the damage done by women themselves; in trying to rid themselves from the constraints of patriarchy's blame of them they have set themselves at the other equally impossible polarity, which has been just as confining.³¹

She suggests the emphasis on '*herstory*' in place of history has fostered the idea that women are not capable of sin, it has disabled us from getting close to who we really are, 'the murky

³⁰ Exum (1993b) pp16-41.

³¹ West (1995) p197.

grey of reality'.³² She cites her own observations in the 1980's at the peace camp at Greenham Common. Her memory is that the women did not entirely band together in the sisterhood of peace and exhibited the kind of infighting to which they were supposed to be opposed, leaving West disaffected with her feminist roots.³³

West examines different kinds of female sin in a patriarchal world: The women of Nazi Germany who consented to the atrocities around them³⁴ and the white women of the slave era in North America who ill treated their black sisters.³⁵ She goes on to comment on the consequent Womanist theology that springs from a different-ness and separateness.³⁶ She repeatedly brings us back to her question concerning whether women are so very good after all. She urges us to look at the evidence, can we even generalise about women's experience at all? Her point finds parallels in the Bible. Sisera's mother and her wise women in Judges 5:30 assume Sisera is delayed because he is collecting treasures; clothes and women. The rape and kidnap of women apparently is not an offence to these women.

West warns that feminists risk creating a new ideal woman and seeing her in scripture just as the old system saw the old 'Good' woman:

We had reacted against a church that had made scripture into a series of feeble fables for gentlefolk and their servants. But we in our turn had re-moralized it with our own message, and edited out all the outrage, the enigma and the challenge of scripture's unmoral stories.³⁷

³² West (1995) p36.

³³ West (1995) p27.

³⁴ West (1995) p31-33.

³⁵ West (1995) p42.

³⁶ West (1995) p40.

The conclusion West reaches in seeking to explode what she calls the 'Myth of Original Innocence'³⁸ is a useful antidote to the pendulum swing between the 'Good' and the 'Bad' woman. She puts Eve back into a position of guilt which she claims frees us, our obedience or disobedience as women is therefore directly to God, not mediated by men.³⁹

This in turn changes our approach to Mary. Mary is no longer a 'Good' woman in the terms of the patriarchal system 'the good girl who somehow got it right in a such a way that no one could imitate her';⁴⁰ instead she is directly obedient to God. The result being that Mary is not an ideal 'spiritual mother' but a 'model for obedient faith and discipleship'.⁴¹

Interestingly it is a similar rationale that Esther Fuchs uses to dispute the same theme that West clings to about the disunity of feminism undermining the movement. Fuchs says that the differences between and among feminist readers ought to strengthen rather than weaken our feminist interrogation of the Bible.⁴² Recognising the complexity and multiplicity of the biblical texts should not be allowed to blind us to the issues it presents. Fuchs sees the 'Good' and 'Bad' women in the text defined as such by the patriarchy that recorded them. She suggests that they are good when obedient to patriarchy and bad and dangerous when they rebel.⁴³ Again the emphasis falls on the cause rather than the symptoms or cure. However, she asks us to keep the issues of gender politics in mind and takes issue with contemporary narrative criticism which risks returning to a state where we collude with the implicit values of

³⁷ West (1995) p197.

³⁸ West (1995) p62.

³⁹ West (1995) p210.

⁴⁰ West (1995) p211.

⁴¹ West (1995) pp212-213.

⁴² Fuchs (2000) p30.

⁴³ Fuchs (2000) pp28-30.

the text because we are not evaluating the content but the style.⁴⁴ In particular Fuchs points us to the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 and to the story of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. Dinah's story is centred on the impulses of the male characters and she is 'discarded' as a person. The danger Fuchs speaks of in a literary approach to the text is this:

By ignoring the ideological problem posed by the stories of rape and adultery, by ignoring the patriarchal implications of the way in which the woman in the text is silenced, the modern androcentric critic reinscribes biblical sexual politics.⁴⁵

I think Fuchs is pointing to the recircling of the issue once again. First women saw the Bible and scholarly interpretation of the Bible create the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman. Then, as West sees, some defence of the female characters has gone too far, creating the same problem from another perspective. Acquitting women from all sinfulness is to deny their humanity and reality as much as it is to cast them as thoroughly evil. Now, when attention in the scholarly world has turned to narrative criticism, Fuchs argues powerfully that as our heads are turned by the complexity and beauty of the text, the women are mystified in their traditional roles rather than challenged.⁴⁶

The Project

My project is to examine some of the parts of the Bible that inform our understanding of women before God. I will consider the text and the challenges it presents, especially in regard to the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman. I will then survey the scholars who have commented on the text and analyse their responses. I will then respond myself to the issues raised.

⁴⁴ Fuchs (2000) pp35-43.

⁴⁵ Fuchs (2000) p39.

⁴⁶ Fuchs (2000) p35.

Whilst scholars such as Cheryl Exum present helpful and thorough analyses of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ woman phenomenon they tend to hold it in the wider perspective of the fragmentation of the women’s stories of which this is only a part. There is a wider aim of feminist theology to challenge the patriarchy behind the telling of the stories. My aim is to find methods for the modern Christian woman to read the Bible positively. This may mean deconstructing some preconceived ideas in the way that Exum among others exemplifies. However, it must also require constructive responses.

I have chosen four female characters. As it happens they are all from the Old Testament but they need not necessarily have been. The important factor in my choice is that they represent four types within the ‘Good’ woman ‘Bad’ woman polarity. The first is Ruth who is interpreted as ‘Good’ and therefore her physicality is diminished. The second is Gomer who is understood to be sexual so is interpreted as also ‘Bad’. The third is Jephthah’s daughter who is so lacking in physical presence that she is considered to be ‘Good’. The fourth is Delilah, whose place in the story is ‘Bad’ so she is given also the reputation of being sexual. So I will discuss Ruth who is famous, Gomer who is confused with a metaphor, Jephthah’s daughter without a name of her own and the infamous Delilah.

Ruth in the book of Ruth is a heroine in her story; clearly her role must be that of a ‘Good’ woman. However, the demands of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ woman problem mean she must be pure and unphysical since she is good. Her extraordinary assertiveness is reread as loyalty, her sexual forwardness becomes innocent obedience, and her pragmatism is interpreted as faith.

Gomer is the wife of Hosea in the first three chapters of the book of Hosea. She is confused with Israel, the errant wife of God, in both the prophecy and in commentary on it. Her own

story is stifled as a result. Her humanity is exchanged for symbolism, her guilt is paraded and her extraordinary husband is compared to God.

Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 is the nameless child who is sacrificed to complete a bargain. An unusual heroine but nevertheless her silence is called obedience, her death is celebrated as a national festival and yet her name is forgotten.

Delilah in Judges 16 is the villainess of Samson's story, she defeats the strong leader from Israel and so her role is a 'Bad' woman. Delilah's victory seals her reputation as villainess: her frank questioning is called wily; her nationality is assumed to be that of the enemy and her sexuality which is silent becomes transformed into that of a seductress extraordinaire.

Chapter 2: Ruth

‘Too Good to be True’⁴⁷?

‘Ruth, among the golden corn, stooping to glean where the reapers had passed, and, stranger as she was, attracting Boaz by her winsome grace, is a charming girl, standing on the threshold of woman-hood. There is not a more perfect picture of a faithful heart than Ruth. It was the keynote of her character, and throughout the charming story it never rings false. Ruth is an inspiration to every woman, and her story is a message that beauty is both an old and an eternal thing...Most of all Ruth is an inspiration to those women whose lives are passed, in small and quiet places, in spheres where they seem to have no scope, and where their days are full of little duties but perhaps of big desires.’⁴⁸

Starting Points

When told the subject of my study, friends, parishioners and colleagues alike frequently respond “Good and bad women, hmmn, well there's Ruth of course, she's good!” If I then enquire what makes them say that, the reply comes in some form or another, ‘Well she just is, isn't she? Ruth is a totally good character.’ It seems, as I will go on to explore, that Ruth is a ‘Good’ woman to both the traditionalists and modern feminists. A cynic might think that Ruth the Moabite has had publicists working for her all these years. Except that it seems, where Ruth is concerned, there are no cynics.

⁴⁷ Crewe and Gaudio (2001)

⁴⁸ Bone (undated) pp70-71.

In her book *The Girls of the Bible* Florence Bone is clearly enchanted by Ruth.⁴⁹ Our first instinct might well be to smile at the quaint turn of phrase she uses. Bone sees a 'winsome' girl, 'on the threshold of womanhood'. In fact she is a woman who has been married and widowed, now with no means of support who is going to go to great lengths to secure a place back in stable society. The idea of the winsome girl demonstrates that many commentators wear blinkers when it comes to Ruth's sexuality.

Yet how far has the passage of time and the toil of numerous scholars really brought us? In many critical responses there is a paradox. Her story of domesticity sits in the Bible amongst the battles of heroes. Ruth is a paragon of ordinariness, an example of how God touches the lives of the commoner as well as the king. Yet they have her, in their analysis, so very good as to be almost inhumanly virtuous, so how can she be compared to the genuinely ordinary? Or in other words, is Ruth perhaps too good to be true?

Ruth is a story with a harsh beginning, resourceful middle and patriarchal ending. It contains scenes that have a multiplicity of possible interpretations and the motivations of the characters are ambiguous throughout. If we are going to compare it to real life, the comparisons are all there. If Ruth is ordinary, it is because ordinary women are complicated.

The Challenge of the Text

Ruth's story is certainly domestic. However, her story is not of a conventional life. Widowed early in the story, rather than turning to her family for support, she leaves the place that was hers and takes responsibility for another widow, her mother in law Naomi, in a foreign land,

⁴⁹ Bone (undated) pp70-90.

with no man to depend on.⁵⁰ By her own initiative she colludes with Naomi to attract the attention of Boaz.⁵¹ Despite the fact that she is a foreigner, he marries her, and she becomes the great grandmother of King David.⁵²

In the context of the story's place in the Judeo-Christian tradition we may be certain it was not her ordinariness that got her story told. Some commentators subscribe to the idea that Ruth is a story told to counter Nehemiah's prohibition of marriage to foreign women. Others, who see Ruth as an earlier text, perceive it to be a sign of God's desire to extend the covenant beyond Israel. In either case her place in Israel's salvation history has been earned by her unusualness.

Ruth is in many ways an exception. First of all she is a Moabite, a foreigner. Also ordinary women would have lived their whole lives dependent on the men in their families. If they became widows they fell back on the support of their fathers, brothers or cousins. Ordinary 'Good' women did not go and live in foreign countries with no support. It is Orpah not Ruth who does the more ordinary thing. She does as she is told by her mother in law, returns to her own family, and like all ordinary good women in the Bible, she is never heard from again.

Ruth broke all the rules of what it is to be a 'Good' woman and still came out as the heroine of the story. It is therefore a very clever story. The pastoral setting and domestic incidents create the atmosphere of something the reader is comfortable with. Perhaps this is why the reader is less inclined to notice when Ruth is daring, manipulative, impulsive or secretive. According to patriarchal values it all turns out well in the end, the women are safely brought back within the

⁵⁰ Ruth 1:16-17.

⁵¹ Ruth 2:4-3:16.

⁵² Ruth 3:10,17.

embrace of society, they are silenced, and it leads to the birth of King David. The ambiguities are overlooked and we all live happily ever after.

There is certainly something about the opening lines of the book of Ruth that gives it the conventional feeling of a fairytale.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.⁵³

It shares that familiar cadence of ‘once upon a time’ with the way we have begun stories for centuries, gentle and lyrical belying the tough and often bloody content of the stories: ‘In the spring of the year at the time when Kings go out to war’,⁵⁴ ‘a long time ago in a galaxy far far away’.⁵⁵

So the setting and the storytelling are much gentler than the realities that we are being told about. But quickly we find ourselves viewing the story from the older widow’s perspective. The narrator is telling us Naomi’s story of woe. The speed with which we learn of the tragic events in Naomi’s life and the familiarity of them might well again distract us from their awfulness. In six verses Naomi leaves her home country because of famine, in the new country her husband dies, her sons marry and some years later her two sons also die.⁵⁶ ‘The woman was left without her two sons and her husband’.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ruth 1:1

⁵⁴ 2 Samuel 11:1 the introduction to the story of David and Bathsheba.

⁵⁵ The text that flies into space at the start of the film *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Lucas (1977).

⁵⁶ Ruth 1:1-6.

⁵⁷ Ruth 1:5.

So far, Naomi is the centre of the story and a catalogue of bad things have happened to her. Not only should this make her the central character in the story but we might also have assumed she is the one who provokes the reader's sympathy.

But Ruth steals the show. Ruth is dramatic and counter cultural in her insistence that she will go with Naomi when she returns to Bethlehem. This is such an extraordinary event that it becomes the focus of our attention.⁵⁸ With the gentle storytelling and the domestic setting the immediate appeal seems to be to admire the loyalty and selflessness of the action of this new character. In a very small moment several things have happened, and it is very easy to read on without seeing what was really going on.

We do not know why Ruth followed Naomi. We do not know if there was a special bond between them, whether it was love or concern or simply impulsiveness. We do not know if Ruth had some reason to fear going home. We do not know whether Naomi wanted her to follow or if she was angry, concerned that Ruth would cause her more trouble since she would be a social outcast as a foreign widow. There are many very interesting critical studies of these questions. However, we must acknowledge that we do not know, and this is the first of the two big ambiguities in the story. It is in the critical hypothesising that we see some of the assumptions appear.

The second substantial ambiguity in the story is the scene on the threshing floor. Once in Bethlehem the women go about survival as best they can. Ruth makes the first move, going out to glean in the fields. It is Ruth who meets a man, Boaz, and he seems to like her. Naomi's strategy then comes into play, she suggests to Ruth that she goes and finds Boaz while he is

asleep, uncovers him and lies down next to him and waits to see what he says she should do. Ruth agrees to Naomi's plan and carries it out, adding a less passive note of her own by asking Boaz to help her.⁵⁹ Ruth, with Naomi's coercion, has gone far outside the norms of her society. This is acknowledged in the text by the air of secrecy about the episode. Yet there is a puzzling lack of disapproval in the text towards what might be considered, in other parts of the Bible, a brazen and sexual act.

Analysis of Critical Responses

Doob Sakenfeld's huge enthusiasm for the book of Ruth is evident from the first page.⁶⁰ She acknowledges that 'a positive assessment of the story has been reached too quickly and too simplistically' so uses the book to thoroughly explore its goodness, as she perceives it, especially the goodness of the title character Ruth herself.

The story from start to finish illustrates the ways in which loyal action, kindness and good will produce a surplus that can break down dividing walls of hostility and open new horizons to shattered lives.⁶¹

None of this I would dispute, Doob Sakenfeld presents an inspiring version of the book and person of Ruth, she urges us to use the book as an example of how God's will for community might work without saying this is how it should work. Yet some of her analysis lapses into the trap of seeing only the good in the character of Ruth. Doob Sakenfeld risks letting the Ruth we may identify with slip away.

⁵⁸ Ruth 1:16-17.

⁵⁹ Ruth 3:9.

⁶⁰ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p1.

⁶¹ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p45.

One of the major themes Doob Sakenfeld draws out is that of the peaceful community. In the midst of the violent and uncertain time of the Judges is set a story of a peaceful idyll (despite the context of famine). She calls it a vision for the future in the form of a story from the past. She points out that there are perils in focussing on the good: we might miss those elements which feminist hermeneutic reminds us of, such as implicit undervaluing and oppression of women in the text.⁶² Yet there is good in almost all she sees in the book of Ruth.

Doob Sakenfeld pays particular attention to the term *hesed*, which is a central concept in the book of Ruth. Although the book of Ruth only uses the word three times Doob Sakenfeld suggests the word sets the tone for the story. *Hesed* expresses positive, loving, loyal action from God to a person or from one person to another. Doob Sakenfeld makes a great deal of *hesed*, the concept creating both the feel and a framework of positive relationships on which much of her analysis of the text rests. Doob Sakenfeld's Ruth is the embodiment of her understanding of *hesed*, and so despite the struggle to keep Ruth real, Doob Sakenfeld often succumbs to reducing her to a positive aura. This not only has the effect of warping the image of Ruth but also impinges on the interpretation of other characters and the story.

Ruth's loyalty to her [Naomi] from the beginning has created conditions whereby Naomi's sorrow is turned to celebration.⁶³

Not the fact that she is home, not the healing effect of time, not Naomi's self-motivation, but Ruth's loyalty has saved Naomi. How, we may wonder, are other grieving widows ever consoled, if they do not have a Ruth?

⁶² Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p10.

⁶³ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p15.

On the subject of the threshing floor Doob Sakenfeld concludes that there was nothing sexual in the reasoning of Boaz when he told Ruth to stay with him for the night on the threshing floor and leave in the morning. She suggests it was simply to avoid being seen.⁶⁴ There is something it seems drawing the commentator's eyes away from the text and into the unreality that the idea of a 'Good' woman seems to inspire. It is the middle of the night and she lies down with him, whatever the narrator means for us to believe happened, surely the possibility that occurs to us should be read into the emotions of the couple. Are we to believe that the thought never crossed their minds? Why therefore does it matter to deny the possibilities? If Ruth is to be preserved as a 'Good' woman it seems that she cannot hold onto the elements of her character and action which appear to be the traits of the 'Bad', woman. The polarity seems to have entered our understanding; the division is clear-cut in the minds of the interpreter. Ruth cannot be remotely sexual, because she is 'Good'.

Amy-Jill Levine acknowledges the deception on Ruth's part but declares that the text does not condemn Ruth for it. Rather, having 'done all a woman could do' to secure redemption she is allied with the respected Biblical theme of trickster.⁶⁵ Esther Fuchs disagrees, comparing her temptation scene with that of Tamar's and sees Ruth as the more honest woman. Fuchs acknowledges the sexual element is in the air, but points out that Ruth's verbal appeal to Boaz is to his sense of duty.⁶⁶ I think the distinction is important and persuasive, but Fuchs risks taking this argument too far. She says the only hint of furtiveness comes from Boaz when he asks Ruth to stay and not risk being seen. 'Ruth is completely exonerated of the slightest hint of deceptiveness.'⁶⁷ John Hamlin is also persuaded of the chastity of the encounter but his

⁶⁴ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p64-65.

⁶⁵ Levine (1992) p83.

⁶⁶ Fuchs (2000) p79.

⁶⁷ Fuchs (2000) p79.

acknowledgment of the atmosphere includes an admission of Ruth's stealth.⁶⁸ Fuchs' hyperbole is unnecessary and undermines her point.

There is a surprising level of hostility towards Naomi evident in scholarly attention towards the character. Doob Sakenfeld, Fewell and Gunn, and Van Wolde all reproach Naomi for being unappreciative of Ruth and ungrateful for her situation.

In Doob Sakenfeld's evaluation, Naomi is certainly a less than wholly pleasant character: not only does she by implication compare poorly with the heroic Ruth as when leaving Moab,⁶⁹ she also points out Naomi's bitterness at God's abandonment which turns out to be unfounded. Inevitably the analyses of the two women go alongside each other as the story unfolds and there are implied contrasts made as well as explicit ones. So when Naomi urges Ruth to return to her own gods Doob Sakenfeld makes no comment but follows the statement with lengthy praise of Ruth's great faith in making the choice for Yahweh.⁷⁰ Consequently the comparison stands to diminish Naomi's faith. It seems at first strange that when Doob Sakenfeld clearly loves the book so much and finds Ruth an inspiring heroine she should not seek the good in Naomi in the same way.

After all, Naomi has suffered greatly with the turmoil of bereavement and change, and we might understand her feelings that she is adrift from the care of Yahweh. Still Doob Sakenfeld is right, Yahweh provides fulfilment in the form of a grandson, and the physical sustenance that comes with Ruth's marriage may also be attributed to God. But the losses at the beginning of the book are not material ones that may be made up; they are people, Naomi's whole

⁶⁸ Hamlin (1996) p43.

⁶⁹ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) p34.

immediate family. Her 'bitterness' is surely natural, her recovery from grief the grace of God, yes, not in spite of her character but perhaps because of it.

Coming finally to read Phyllis Tribble, having read so much that referred to her work on Ruth, I was surprised to find her less absorbed with the characters than I had been led (especially by Exum) to expect. There are the frequently quoted passages in which she exalts these women as heroines, yet the overall analysis is no more besotted with their goodness or eager for their badness than the commentators who criticise her. However, Tribble beats a path which all who follow her retread. She seeks the feminist heroine and finds her, as independent as she may be living under patriarchy. She sees where Naomi and Ruth are proactive:

Naomi takes over. Aware of the kindness of Boaz, she begins to act upon it. She does not wait for God to intervene with a miracle. Instead, she herself moves from being the receiver of calamity to becoming the agent of change and challenge.⁷¹

Tribble sees the women working out salvation in a man's world. Her interpretation of the ending is hopeful, perhaps overly hopeful.⁷² The salvation of the women in the story is in the surrendering to recapture by the patriarchy that frames their world. This is a theme commented on by Ellen van Wolde. Naomi is widowed and without sons to support her. Ruth is without a man to identify her and is a foreigner.⁷³ Each is saved by Ruth's marriage, she is brought into the covenant community, and Naomi's place is re-established by the birth of a grandson. Furthermore, once they are recaptured, they are silenced. Where Tribble sees transformation of death into life we may be cautioned to remember that this is the example of what the women

⁷⁰ Doob Sakenfeld (1999) pp30-35.

⁷¹ Tribble (1978) p182.

⁷² Tribble (1978) p196.

⁷³ van Wolde (1997) p2.

of the story did in dire circumstances and out of desperation. It is a story of what is out of place being restored. So the women's actions are exceptional and not self evidently a model of living ordinary life with God. These factors do not diminish the power of the story, but I think they do tempt us to look for more than is really there which in turn distorts our response.

Harsh reality is what van Wolde asks us to see in the book of Ruth.⁷⁴ However, she too romanticises the story, and in particular the character of Ruth. Where Naomi is 'immersed in herself... a typical mother in law', Ruth is 'moved' and 'soft hearted'.⁷⁵ It is the interpretation of Ruth as a follower of Yahweh that inspires van Wolde's admiration of Ruth, again in contrast to Naomi.⁷⁶ Of Ruth's choice to follow Naomi van Wolde says this:

Going without expecting anything in return, trusting in the future for no reason, faithfulness without any reasonable hope of reward.⁷⁷

The ending of the story, where Ruth is sidelined and silent, is where van Wolde loses sight of her gritty reality altogether. She interprets the women of Bethlehem's delight in the son born to Naomi as the story's reminder to us that Ruth is more important than a son.⁷⁸ The conclusion van Wolde reaches echoes the adoring words of Bone above, Ruth becomes a good example, specifically to Naomi. Ruth has moved her mother in law from discontent to passivity to searching for a future.⁷⁹ This is persuasively argued, yet it still rests upon an interpretation of Ruth as very good and Naomi as very bad. There is little room for the complexities of grief and healing in this assessment. Instead the women are either good and spiritual, or bad and asserting their feelings.

⁷⁴ van Wolde (1997) p1.

⁷⁵ van Wolde (1997) pp12-13.

⁷⁶ van Wolde (1997) p22.

⁷⁷ van Wolde (1997) p25.

⁷⁸ van Wolde (1997) p112.

Orpah generally receives little critical attention. Tribble points out that it is Orpah's decision rather than Ruth's that is 'sound sensible and secure'⁸⁰. So Orpah is the sane one, yet she dies to the story. Orpah's choice is the normal 'good' thing; she obeys the wise advice of her elder and she bows to the systems and structures that surround her. Patriarchy would presumably applaud her. Two issues spring from this, one is the feminist response that so admires Ruth's dynamic alternative, her loyalty to Naomi in defiance of the expectations of her society. If Ruth is a heroine to the feminist, then Orpah is a wimp; her epitaph as she departs from the text is by contrast with Ruth's declaration that follows it, unloving and uncourageous. The second point is that it is Ruth's story that is told, not Orpah's. The society that preserved the story is the same one that formulated and maintained the norms that Orpah stuck to and Ruth defied. Orpah's exit is fairly typical of what happens to 'Good' women in the Bible, they are a plot device, creating a positive effect on the story but having no place or character of their own.

Fewell and Gunn present a fuller analysis of Naomi as a 'Bad' woman than the implications present in some of the other commentators work. They have produced an article which deals specifically with this subject *A Son is Born to Naomi*⁸¹ and a book *Compromising Redemption*⁸² in which the theme is integrated along with a wider commentary. They particularly write in response to Tribble's more positive assessment of Naomi.⁸³ However their protests bear all the marks of the problem that I am exploring, in disputing that Naomi is so very good they tip the balance the other way, insisting on her badness at all opportunities.⁸⁴ As

⁷⁹ van Wolde (1997) p72.

⁸⁰ Tribble (1978) p172.

⁸¹ Fewell and Gunn (1988).

⁸² Fewell and Gunn (1990).

⁸³ Fewell and Gunn (1990) p74.

⁸⁴ Fewell and Gunn (1990) pp83,98.

for Ruth, in this that they claim to be a 'leaner, tougher'⁸⁵ reading, the younger widow has become quite impressive. She is, they say, devout, recognising the truth and excellence of the Israelite religion.⁸⁶ Also this woman is a brilliant arguer.⁸⁷ Perhaps she even displays sacrificial love.⁸⁸ She is also sensitive, always knowing the right thing to say to Naomi or to do for Naomi.⁸⁹ In a strange display of superiority Fewell and Gunn declare 'it is not inconceivable that Ruth is primarily looking out for herself, but we choose not to think her speech that hollow.'⁹⁰ My question is why not? It seems that Fewell and Gunn are as desperate to see a wholly good Ruth as a wholly bad Naomi.

Peter Coxon has answered Fewell and Gunn in their article about Naomi. He recommends some balance in the interpretations rather than the extremes they advocate. Coxon suggests that Fewell and Gunn are ignoring the emotion of her goodbyes and the regard for the welfare of the women. She kisses Ruth and Orpah and weeps.⁹¹ He suggests the silence from Naomi on the return to Bethlehem may not be contempt but consent.⁹² More importantly he describes an equality of action. Naomi having been the prime mover in chapter 1 gives way to Ruth in chapter 2, the result is not competition for the status of the heroine but a partnership.⁹³

Another approach, which acknowledges that the roles in the text may have been simplified, is that of Jon Berquist. He speaks of a process called dedifferentiation, that is to say an undoing

⁸⁵ Fewell and Gunn (1990) p13.

⁸⁶ Fewell and Gunn (1990) p95.

⁸⁷ Fewell and Gunn (1990) p96.

⁸⁸ Fewell and Gunn (1990) pp98-99.

⁸⁹ Fewell and Gunn (1990) pp96,100.

⁹⁰ Fewell and Gunn (1990) p98.

⁹¹ Coxon (1989) p26.

⁹² Coxon (1989) p27.

⁹³ Coxon (1989) p28.

of prior patterns and role definitions with, hopefully, positive results.⁹⁴ Sociologically speaking, he says, in times of crisis people's roles change and merge.⁹⁵ He therefore looks at the characters in the book of Ruth from this point of view. Ruth adds roles in this time of crisis. The role of daughter in law is added to by the typical male role, declaring commitment to Naomi.⁹⁶ In order to be a provider she also becomes gleaner and seducer.⁹⁷ In order to find a long term solution, Naomi becomes a matchmaker. This interpretation offers an appealing acknowledgment of Ruth's varied behaviour and does not judge her for her actions as either particularly good or bad. However, the overall message is still that a short dalliance with assertiveness or action may be forgiven as it is temporary and at a time of crisis.

Cheryl Exum likewise calls for us to look outside the typical categories when assessing these characters. She suggests the book of Ruth invites us to collapse the gender distinctions with which we operate as readers. Essentially she asks us to embrace the ambiguity of the story.⁹⁸

Response

Ruth steps outside the boundaries of conventional behaviour and asserts her own desires in the situation with an extravagant speech (1:16-17). She is therefore doing what many biblical women are judged mercilessly for and yet she escapes the same sentence. However, before we can breath a sigh of relief that the acceptability of Ruth's actions are in fact a part of a more well rounded acceptance of women in the Bible, we are faced with what the actual response is. The text makes no comment on what she does, the story is silent about the curious action of this woman.

⁹⁴ Berquist (1997) p84.

⁹⁵ Berquist (1997) p85.

⁹⁶ Berquist (1997) p87.

The temptation is to think that the text's lack of comment indicates that Ruth's actions are therefore acceptable. However, I do not think it is that straightforward. The silence means Ruth can remain a 'Good' woman. The action however, is still strange. The text's silent acceptance denies the reality of Ruth's behaviour. Clearly then the text is not really comfortable with what she does; it just tries to pretend it never happened.

The critical response picks up on the gap in the text and works hard to fill it. The commentators are so convinced by her goodness that they try desperately to find excuses as to why she stepped out of the confines of acceptable behaviour for a 'Good' woman. She is a 'Good' woman and so when we see her doing something perplexing it must be for good motives, she is being loving, loyal, selfless and unnaturally brave in order to achieve these things. She is even attributed the spiritual element of the 'Good' woman by the suggestion that 'Your God will be my God' (1:16) is an affirmation of Yahweh.

The text's orchestration of events is completed a chapter later when Boaz retells her story on patriarchy's terms. The outburst and action of chapter 1 is reduced to a simple act of concern for a widow, the loyalty of a 'Good' woman (2:11).

On the subject of Naomi I wonder if the framework of a story leads us to see only one 'Good' central female character. Or perhaps as there are only two women, the positive and negative characterisations are reached by our liking for neat polarity? If it were just a story it would matter to some extent because the stories we tell reinforce our perceptions. But this is more

⁹⁷ Berquist (1997) p88.

⁹⁸ Exum (1996) p174

than a story: because we seek what it tells us from God to impact on our own lives, it matters even more that we approach the characters with a degree of realism about what we should expect from each other as women and ourselves.

In fact, Naomi demonstrates deep faithfulness: if we are to take her words at face value, she repeatedly calls on God to bless. Even at the moment of leaving Moab when she blames God for deserting her she still calls on him to bless her daughters in law.⁹⁹ You can build a heroine just as easily out of Naomi as you can out of Ruth, yet Doob Sakenfeld has chosen not to. The tendency to see only the positive or the negative rather than the fuller picture is demonstrated here. Naomi and Ruth live in a domestic setting; their virtues and vices are similar to those of women in their domestic circumstances to this day. The text then is offering something important, the temptation of the commentator to polarise the women is profoundly unhelpful. Surely it would be more helpful to the Christian woman to see God's grace in the resourcefulness and blessings of ordinariness. Cannot Ruth still be an inspiration of loving kindness and a woman through whom God demonstrates his grace if she is only like us?

Ruth's act of going to the threshing floor and thereby offering herself physically is responded to with admiration by many commentators, including the same commentators who deride Naomi for being a nagging old misery, just for her speaking out. I'd like to suggest the possibility that Naomi cleanses Ruth of the disapproval she might be expected to receive for her actions in the story. If Ruth were a young widow whose desperation and resourcefulness led her to the threshing floor, as opposed to the instruction of an older wiser character, what would we think of her? Would she still be such a good girl? Would we still be able to read her story as a romantic ideal?

I doubt that we would even be able to read it as the story of admirable resourcefulness that many commentators suggest. We can only compare it to the treatment of other biblical stories. For example, the story of Tamar and Judah¹⁰⁰ might suggest at least that such resourcefulness is commended. Yet Tamar's action is justified by the fact that she was righting a legal wrong. She was resourceful, but only to take what was rightfully hers. Her story in fact upholds the law, and shows those who do not respect the law as the loser in the story. Her actions bring justice, and so Tamar is remembered as having grit and verve. Ruth would have no such defence, so how is she a heroine and not a harlot? The idea is Naomi's and this is what preserves Ruth. Naomi instructs her daughter in law, Ruth dutifully obliges, and so the blame shifts to Naomi in many readers' eyes. Naomi absorbs that which is reckless and deceitful in the story, Ruth remains only with the heroism of risking her body and her little status in the community to feed her mother in law.

Doob Sakenfeld links Ruth's character to the good woman of Proverbs. It seems to me this sums up much of Doob Sakenfeld's and others' attitude to Ruth. Ruth is a goody in the story, Ruth is a model, she is therefore turned into an extreme of this in the discussion of her, and she becomes an ideal. This seems to me to be the crucial problem. I appreciate the positive model that the commentators wish to draw out. Ruth and Naomi are interesting full characters and the examination of them and their story is a useful example. But one of the helpful things about the text is that it presents women who are quite believable, they are convincing in their attitudes and behaviour. If we are going to treat them as presentations of something real about women they can be neither the 'Good' nor the 'Bad' woman, they must be the whole, with the

⁹⁹ Ruth 1:8,9, 2:19,20.

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 38.

mixed motives and complex personalities that real women have. If Ruth is merely the epitome of a 'Good' woman she is less of a heroine and more of a burden to the Christian reader now.

The sophistication of the story hoodwinks us into seeing at least one, if not two, strong self-determining women making their own way with God in the world. We are told that their silence at the end of the story was what they craved and now they are fulfilled, now their emptiness of life without husband or son is satisfied. The text's deviations from the norms are what eventually confirm those norms to be intact. Ruth and Naomi flirt with life on the outside, which turns out to be a bleak and barren place, and God's grace is that he draws them back in. In the meantime we play games with the temporarily released women characters.

Modern commentators have made Orpah the one who fails to be loving and loyal, Naomi the one with all the distasteful attributes of the 'Bad' woman and Ruth the one who heroically stands by the values of what it is to be 'Good'.

I believe that the extravagant words and gestures Ruth makes and some of the inconsistency in what she says may be attributable to a desire to secure herself a place of importance with the other characters. At the beginning of the story she is about to be alone. Her oath to Naomi, which sounds so generous, also means that she does not end up alone. It might be noted here that the vow is not entirely fulfilled by the story when circumstances change. In essence, the promise is that Ruth will follow Naomi; the women do stay together but at times Ruth takes the lead. Then Ruth meets Boaz; again her humility and gratitude are extravagant.¹⁰¹ Such behaviour is sure to get her noticed. As the story progresses she continues to emphasise how important she is to Naomi by exaggerating the risk she is taking by gleaning in the fields. Ruth says that Boaz has told her to stay by his servants, a statement which gets Naomi worried,

when in fact Boaz specifically said stay by my young women.¹⁰² When she goes to Boaz on the threshing floor she throws herself on his mercy. Surely it is flattering that she asks him to be the one to save her.¹⁰³ She then immediately tells Naomi that she has *her* interests most at heart, coming home with grain that she pretends was given for Naomi.¹⁰⁴ All the way through the story, Ruth demonstrates a desire to please and to be seen by the other two characters as important to them. We may well recognise such subtle manipulation in relationships today. Keeping everyone else happy, thereby securing her own place in their affections, Ruth spares herself the isolation which was threatened by her husband's death. Not especially 'Good' or 'Bad' behaviour, but rather more ordinary.

Inevitably, what we do know about Ruth is outweighed by what we do not know. Why Ruth followed Naomi, what happened on the threshing floor, the difficulty of the patriarchal ending and other mysteries remain unresolved. Interpretations have smoothed these ambiguities over. Commentators have seen so much good in Ruth that anything uncertain has largely disappeared. Traditional commentators have seen Ruth's loyalty and adored her for it. Feminist commentators have seen a resourceful woman and have been blinded to her less heroic and more ordinary qualities. My conclusion is that there is so much to see of ourselves in Ruth that we would be foolish to exalt her out of our reach.

¹⁰¹ Ruth 2:10.

¹⁰² Ruth 2:21.

¹⁰³ Ruth 3:17.

¹⁰⁴ Ruth 3:17.

Chapter 3: Gomer

‘Love with a woman who sells herself’¹⁰⁵?

‘What is the story? Hosea married a woman named Gomer. As a result of the marriage three children were born to them – Jezreel, Lo-ruhamah, and Lo-ammi, naming them as they were named. Then Gomer played him false, and he cast her out judicially, as she had left him in infidelity. After a while, when she had descended to the uttermost depths of degradation, having become merely a slave, the property of someone else, Hosea sought her out in her degradation, bought her at the price of a slave, and restored her to his side as his bride.

That is the story bluntly told... With the first part we are familiar: it is tragic, heartbreaking, but not unknown. But the story of a man seeking a woman when she has passed through all the period of passion, and has lost her value on the material level, and is merely a slave; and of such a man, going after her, buying her for thirty shekels and bringing her back, and restoring her to his side as his bride, is something very uncommon. That is the domestic story that lies behind this prophecy.’¹⁰⁶

Starting Points

Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea, is a curious enigma. She appears at the beginning of Hosea’s book as the wife he has taken at God’s command, to take a wife of whoredom because the nation has committed whoredom¹⁰⁷. The easy response is that this is a man who loves an unfaithful woman, maybe a prostitute. However, we know very little about her, what we do know is bound up with the prophet’s message. Gomer’s function in the text is symbolic from the outset, yet part of the prophet’s use of her is that he tells a little of their story. She is

¹⁰⁵ Luhrmann (2001).

¹⁰⁶ Campbell Morgan, (undated) pp8-9.

then both a symbol and a character and the lines between the two are heavily blurred. Hosea sets the scene with the sparse story he has told of his own marriage and then uses the image of an adulterous wife to tell us something about the nation and its relationship with God. The wife Israel merges with the story of the wife Gomer, a useful symbol to communicate the message about the nation. However, using her as a symbol is destructive to our view of Gomer as a person and consequently, I suggest, destructive to the reader who integrates the Bible's view of women into her or his own understanding.

It is so easy to make a judgement about Gomer like Campbell Morgan's above. He claims the story is 'bluntly told', yet of course his summary is riddled with interpretations that affect the reader's view of Gomer and of Hosea. Campbell Morgan has fallen headlong into the trap of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman dichotomy. Seizing the elements of her character that he wishes to condemn, he forgets a woman cannot be merely these things, a marriage breakdown cannot be one person's fault and the gracious husband Hosea cannot be God. Perhaps it is the fact that he has already written Gomer off, or perhaps it is the cultural context of the earlier 20th century which enables him to speak of her in terms like '[she] has lost all her value on the material level, and is merely a slave'.¹⁰⁸ It is the way he speaks of Gomer that degrades her, not the flaws in her humanity.

The Challenge of the Text

Gomer's appearance as a character falls broadly into three sections, one in each of the first three chapters of the book. First there is the family narrative in chapter 1, beginning with the

¹⁰⁷ Hosea 1:2

¹⁰⁸ Campbell Morgan, (undated) pp8-9.

‘strange command’¹⁰⁹ to take a wife of whoredom and what appears to be Hosea’s consequent action of marrying Gomer. Gomer then bears Hosea three children who also become illustrations for Hosea’s prophecy. Then in chapter 2 comes God’s strange love poem, written as the husband of unfaithful wife Israel, a tormented lover whose passion runs to oppressive, obsessive, possessive desire. This section, though apparently not about Hosea and Gomer directly, influences our view of the marriage in two ways. It is God’s word to Hosea and it is natural for us to read some reflection of Hosea’s own experience into the way he reports the prophecy. Also the deliberate use of Gomer as a symbol for the unfaithful wife Israel means that what we learn of one wife in chapter 2 affects our view of the other wife to whom she has been linked. Chapter 3 only adds to these layers of ambiguity concerning this marriage. Now the prophet is told to ‘go love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress’.¹¹⁰ Opinion varies as to whether the intention of the author is that this woman is really Gomer. However, it probably does not matter. The three chapters work together in this cryptic way to create an impression of an adulterous woman who will communicate to the audience how faithless Israel has become and how appalling it is. The unified picture of the woman is generally named Gomer, the personal face of the symbol.

The challenge then is the use of the woman as the symbol. The story is of course not directly about Gomer, it is about God and Israel. Is it appropriate to use one person, who has no voice of her own in the text, as a symbol for the wickedness of a nation?

¹⁰⁹ Limburg (1988) p8.

¹¹⁰ Hosea 3:1.

There is apparently no reason why this particular woman must be the symbol; the only qualification in God's command is that she is a 'wife of whoredom'.¹¹¹ So Gomer is reduced to the label of whore and the function of symbol of wickedness.

When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord. So he went and took Gomer, daughter of Diblaim and she conceived and bore him a son.'¹¹²

From this we know that Gomer is labelled as having some sexual history, but there is widespread disagreement as to whether this is involvement in shrine worship, prostitution, adultery, promiscuity or simply being a woman of faithless Israel. It is not just the commentators who disagree about this matter, the translations also vary. The NRSV has 'a wife of whoredom' leaving room for more interpretation than the NIV has by translating the phrase 'an adulterous wife'.

Before Gomer enters the story, before Hosea chooses her to marry, her role is cast,¹¹³ and she is to enter the plot as a woman connected to some kind of sexual sin. However, the easy conclusion reached by Campbell Morgan that she is therefore the epitome of the 'Bad' woman is far from satisfactory.

The greatest difficulty is that Gomer as a metaphor is a big part of the way we see her. We cannot separate the person from the illustration she is used as. If Gomer is in the text to tell us

¹¹¹ Hosea 1:2

¹¹² Hosea 1:2-3.

¹¹³ Hosea 1:2.

something about Israel, what we think of the nation we also associate with the woman.¹¹⁴ Our memory of Gomer is likely to be influenced by her involvement in the metaphor as well as the facts Hosea presents.

The question, which occupies a lot of critical attention, ‘which part of the text refers to Gomer?’ is probably largely fruitless. For one thing we cannot know, and for another the impressions made by the different sections of the text are not distinct enough for us as readers to hold them apart.

Perhaps the text has failed in an attempt to faithfully represent a real situation, or perhaps it has failed to create a credible one. Alternatively, perhaps the text means to be ambiguous. In any case there are many gaps in the text regarding Gomer, and the reader is inclined to fill them whether from the context on the page, from their own culture or their own experience, and Gomer springs to life again to face a judgement when she has had no voice in her defence.

Perhaps the challenge that is hardest for us to face is the nature of God in these chapters. Hosea represents him as willing to call a woman a whore and use her as a symbol for his marriage partner whom he also calls a whore.¹¹⁵ Hosea writes of God as a husband who will violently punish and gently woo his wife by turns until she is subdued.¹¹⁶

All the time we are encouraged in church to read the Bible and interpret God’s word to the nation as an individual message to us. So should we not be concerned about what message any woman receives about how God perceives her when she reads Hosea?

¹¹⁴Weems (1995) p25 & 106.

¹¹⁵ Hosea 1:2.

Analysis of Critical Responses

The scholarly responses reveal more than just the different possibilities about Gomer; they reveal an attitude to the concept of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ woman. Can she be a ‘whore’ without being ‘wicked’? That is to say, can she have been either promiscuous or adulterous without it damning her character in an irredeemable way?

The traditional commentaries centre their interest in 1:2 on the question ‘what kind of whore was Gomer?’ and the observation that Hosea responds to God’s command with remarkable obedience. Macintosh has her as a woman whose characteristic behaviour is that of unfaithfulness.¹¹⁷ Davies calls her a prostitute with whom Hosea has an extra-marital relationship.¹¹⁸ Beeby sees her as enough of a harlot to symbolise Israel,¹¹⁹ and Wolff claims that her behaviour mirrors Israel by the very fact that it is normal in the cultural and religious context.¹²⁰ The subtleties of the argument vary but the focus remains the same. Limburg characterises these by saying the command is strange and it brings to mind all sorts of questions. He wonders what kind of harlot she might be and how Hosea felt about marrying her. The fascination with the fantasy whore, with whom God has not only sanctioned a relationship but which he commanded Hosea to embark on, apparently still draws the male audience in. The only character with feelings on the matter is Hosea, keeping Gomer firmly in the object or function category that is permitted by fragmenting a woman’s personality into ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’.

¹¹⁶ Hosea 2.

¹¹⁷ Macintosh (1997) p8.

¹¹⁸ Davies (1992) p48.

Wolff tries to salvage the good character of Gomer by proclaiming that she is no different from her contemporaries in Israel at the time, losing her virginity in a Canaanite bridal rite. But this only keeps the polarity intact rather than succeeding in beginning a search for an integrated woman. Other commentators scoff at the attempt to see Gomer as less than the whore, demanding instead that she is called a whore so must be one. Beeby, for example, in the name of taking the text seriously demands that she is a harlot. But his protestations about being real end there, when the reality is that if she is a harlot in any terms she cannot be only that, there is always more to a person's story than one defining characteristic. That she is called a whore seems to be an excuse for the abuse of dismissing her role in a relationship with Hosea. A relationship which Beeby conveniently forgets must exist if Hosea is, as he insists, to mirror the 'personality and pathos' of God in his relationship with Israel.¹²¹

Exum's assertion is that no woman of that time and place would have been free enough from the constraints of society to exhibit such behaviour, and that therefore Gomer represents a male fantasy rather than a real woman. But Exum, just like Hosea himself and all the commentators who read the book, speaks of Gomer as a person when she discusses her, and consequently a woman who is *more* than a fantasised illustration comes into being, albeit in the minds of the reader. But even women who occupy only the reality of our minds are still women, and the way we talk about them still impacts on what we understand about all women, real and imagined.

¹¹⁹ Beeby (1989) p14.

¹²⁰ Wolff (1974) pp14-15.

¹²¹ Beeby (1989) p15.

In all this discussion Gomer never comes alive, the complexities of human nature are never applied to her, and neither is the question asked, as it is of Hosea,¹²² 'how does she feel?'. This is particularly frustrating when we are faced with work such as that of Mays. He devotes a good deal of attention to the historicity of the story and concludes that they are real people and true happenings. Yet he speaks in cold scholarly terms such as 'the marriage is an indictment against Israel, a way of disclosing their sin'.¹²³

The only conclusion to draw from these works is that action that asserts sexuality labels a woman as 'Bad', and deserving of punishment. If she avoids punishment it is by mercy not by right. Any goodness in her, or any other role (such as Gomer as mother) will be obliterated and forgotten.

Beeby calls his book on Hosea 'Grace Abounding', and certainly there is a huge emphasis in the book of Hosea on the grace of God. The image of love and forgiveness is very powerful. But as Israel is apparently undeserving of the grace of God, so the woman of the entire Chapters 1-3 image is wholly undeserving of the husband's forgiveness. We are told no redeeming qualities about her, only her husband's graciousness. To make the theological point, that we don't need to deserve God's grace in order to receive it, the image works well. But it colludes with the notion that it is possible for an individual woman to be all bad simply because of physical action, or indeed the reputation of it. Whether her adultery is real or symbolic the report of it has drawn her physical, sexual, nature to our eyes, and she is condemned as 'Bad' for it. Only in the removal of any outlet for that nature can she be

¹²² Limburg (1988) p8.

¹²³ Mays (1969) p22.

redeemed.¹²⁴ Adding the abuse of the woman Israel into the discussion heightens the problem. The concept isn't only destructive to a woman's self image, it is potentially so to her body as well.

Whatever she has done or not (and of course the case will never be proved) in the re-telling of the story by the commentators the temptation seems to be to exaggerate. Campbell Morgan's comments in the introduction are such an example. Just like Ruth's goodness, Gomer's badness is fruitful for the eloquent hyperbole of academics making their point.

Hosea is equally distorted by the treatment of the text. His characterisation as a noble and long-suffering husband is assumed into the story with even less evidence than there is of his wife's promiscuity.

Perhaps Limburg has a point in asking 'How did Hosea feel?'¹²⁵, but we are given no hint of an answer in the text, except that once again the metaphor makes an impact on our understanding of a character. Hosea is an illustration for God and we know and are told that God is a patient husband to wayward Israel. So the longing and frustration of chapter 2, and of the whole Old Testament salvation story, is implied into the husbandly character of Hosea, just as the character of Israel influences that of Gomer.

The text makes no explicit judgement about the prophet himself; there is no description of his character as there is of Gomer. We know his ancestors, his children and his wife. We know he

¹²⁴ Hosea 3:3.

¹²⁵ Limburg (1988) p8.

reports personal and national messages from God. Beyond this we have only our assumptions drawn from our reading of his prophecy.

The commentators are at times interested in the person behind the prophecy, allowing the man to be shaped by the character of God. There is speculation about Hosea, but the difficulty is that it is within the framework of what is understood about the men of God in the Old Testament. For Hosea, just like for Abraham, Moses and David, the black and white judgement of women since Eve is muted into the recognisable shades of real humanity.

The following extract from Beeby's commentary shows how tempting it is to re-use the same powerful metaphor that Hosea used to communicate the message of the book today, and that the retelling of the story re-inscribes the politics of the text.

Israel with her virginity restored can be expected shyly and demurely to say 'I will' at the new wedding ceremony (v15). Yet Israel's 'I will' to God is wholly dependant of the reiterated 'I will' of God. Israel has said 'I will' so often; she is an expert at it, a professional in fact. She has said 'I will' to all and sundry. What is being offered to her is the opportunity to say 'I will' with utter sincerity and singleness of heart to her true husband. But how can he believe her? Has he not learned his lesson and finally admitted his wife's total inability to keep her promise? The answer is that the lesson has indeed been learned. He is not deceived. He knows that Israel's 'I will' is anchored in his own constant 'willing'.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Beeby (1989) p29.

Beeby is writing for the church rather than for scholars¹²⁷, just as Hosea was written for the men of Israel rather than people analysing centuries later. Beeby is simply trying to communicate Hosea's message of God's grace to a new generation. The metaphor works just as well now as it did then, it is more vivid than stating the doctrine of salvation academically. But if this is the God we are offered, is he worth coming back to? He has abused his wife, he has said nothing good about her and has announced through his spokespeople that he is willing to have her back, providing she is utterly chaste, providing she implicitly acknowledges all the fault (as he is taking no responsibility and is offering no positive change in the relationship). He considers her so weak and dependant on himself that he credits her with no strength of her own, and without his support she would not be able to sustain a meaningful relationship. The words may be beautiful in Hosea chapter 2 and in Beeby's retelling, but to the contemporary reader does it not bear a resemblance to the *modus operandi* of a wife beater?

As the woman is seduced back into what appears to be a relationship of love and abuse by turns, so the reader is seduced into the writer's way of thinking about the woman. The natural impulses of horror at the threats such as 'stripping his wife naked'¹²⁸ are subdued. There is the excuse of cultural context, because life was different then, it is acceptable that violent things were said. Also the narrative seeks to justify the husband, the woman is unworthy and we are invited to sympathise with the deity.¹²⁹ The poetic language not only lures the woman back into the relationship, it veils the harsh reality of the nature of this marriage from the modern reader too. All these things seem to me to be reasons why we fail to be shocked at the violence of the text, yet there is another which is even more powerful. Calling a woman a metaphor dehumanises her, the commentators can talk about her as a function in the text rather than a

¹²⁷ Beeby (1989) pvii.

¹²⁸ Hosea 2:3.

person. And so the 'Bad' woman is conceptualised still more, pushing her further and further away from the reality of what it is to be a woman. Talking about a woman in abusive terms, with the excuse of her being only a symbol, creates a model in scripture that we have to endure the results of today. We are forced to swallow the line that it is ever okay to talk about a woman like that, diminishing therefore our self worth, and creating a belief in this 'Bad' woman who we must never be or we endure this wrath.

Response

Gomer is an illustration for 'Bad', for the very concept of badness that the nation Israel is guilty of. Ruth is an illustration of good things, the openness of the covenant, God's redeeming purposes in action in ordinary lives. However, set apart from their function in the story of salvation history, if we compare each woman's dubious sexual actions we see revealed the trickery of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman polarity. We engage with Ruth and Gomer where we are presented with them. Quite naturally we see each in the context we are offered them, and Ruth's is positive about her, while Gomer's is negative. However, in closer examination how different is what we know of what they have done?

Both Ruth and Gomer are women with some ambiguity about their sexual behaviour according to the text before their marriage. So I found myself asking the question, what if Ruth's story was used as a metaphor for Israel's infidelity instead? What if a version of the threshing floor scene was told, calling Ruth a whore just like Hosea 1:2 calls Gomer one, followed by a prophecy like this?

¹²⁹ Which sounds remarkably like 'she had it coming'.

My beloved, why must you creep in the night to find a lover? Why do you steal upon him while he is full of drink and sell yourself for his barley to feed yourself and the woman who sends you to whore. Will I not care for you as an alien in a foreign land? How I long for you to cleave to me. For how many generations must I wait before you come safely under my wing? But you went hunting in the dark for other gods to worship, and offered yourself in your nakedness to come under the skirt of another.

There are enough similarities to Ruth's story to subtract the extenuating circumstances we are aware of from the familiar version of the story and call Ruth a 'Bad' woman. But as it is, just as the context of the idyll hastens us to sanctify Ruth so the context of wrath and the comparisons made urge us to damn Gomer and ignore the ambiguities of the text and forget the reality of a whole woman hidden amidst an illustration. So Ruth and Gomer are addressed and discussed at polar ends of a spectrum of morality that perhaps each might more comfortably find a place closer to the centre, just as all flawed human beings probably would.

Ruth, who spoke only in tune with the metanarrative of patriarchy, who found her way through the gloomy uncertainty of widowhood into the glorious restoration of marriage and motherhood, is silenced at the point of her marriage. She only needed to speak when there was no man to speak for her.¹³⁰ Through silencing her and playing down the sexual possibilities at the threshing floor, Ruth is saved to be a good example, a disembodied spiritual influence. Gomer, who speaks in the text only through action, by these standards, stood no chance of ending up with a 'Good' woman's epitaph. She was sought out for the marriage for being a whore; this is all that brought her into the story. For the metaphor to work we are required to

¹³⁰ Ruth 2:5.

conclude that she is, at the very least, of an unfaithful nature. The text leaves us with the conclusion that she is an unworthy bride, but that she has been tamed, for the time being.

When she is brought back to the marriage, assuming it is her that Hosea is referring to, she is silenced just as Ruth was. Gomer spoke in sexual actions, as whore, as mother, as adulteress, and, recreated as a virgin bride, she is silenced by her restraint from them¹³¹. All the way through our analysis we see both Gomer the woman and the woman Israel, and here at the end of Gomer's story the two are powerfully brought together again, you will remain mine, and Israel will return to seek the Lord says Hosea in 3:3-5. What more compelling rhetoric could there be to control women's activity and sexuality than to tell them that they are responsible for Israel's salvation?

Even though there are only scraps of a character to go on, Gomer is presented as a real person, who has flesh, blood, feelings, forebears and descendants. She has a husband. She is more than a symbol she is a woman. If we are going to ascribe portions of human nature and femaleness to her then she cannot be denied the rest. We cannot deny her the existence of enough to make her a whole person, even though we cannot know that person better. The feminist vogue for finding the suppressed female voice could have an important function here. Speculation about what Gomer might have had to say helps us to put flesh on the bones that Hosea's scant story provides. However, in contrast to some of the other Old Testament female characters, Gomer has received little of this treatment. The feminist work on Gomer centres rather around the abusive relationship advocated by the symbol of the adulterous wife rather than the character of Gomer herself.

So what are we to do? We can retread the familiar path of the feminists and cry injustice, though we risk sending Gomer to the other polarity trying to defend her goodness. We may seek to prove how wrong and patriarchal it is of the author and redactors to record Gomer this way. We may likewise note that the commentaries of the 20th century are largely bound by the patriarchy of the same traditional interpretation. My standpoint is that it is not helpful, not thousands of years ago or now, to call a woman a suitable symbol for wickedness. So how are we to accept the message and reject the medium?

Should we argue for a tame reality for Gomer at all? Should we seek the redemption of a extremely rebellious woman rather than try to save her from herself by dividing her from the fear fantasy of the woman Israel illustration with which she has become entangled. The use of the metaphor makes Gomer judged as 'Bad', as only 'Bad'. It makes it sound as if the sexual exploits of a woman are God's passionate interest. But that is only a metaphor for his passion that Hosea is seeking to communicate here to the ruling elite men of Israel, God's passion is that these people love, honour and worship him alone. But the real passion is less attention grabbing than the salacious story of Gomer. Sadly the inevitable inadequacy of the metaphor has left us with a great deal of confusion about the text which we can never clear up. Perhaps like the preacher who knows that the charmingly funny illustration will be remembered for years while the truth it pointed to will be lost before Sunday lunch, Hosea should have known his reliance on a fear fantasy such as female sexuality would be bound to hold up the audience from seeing the real point.

If we could detach ourselves from the view that using Gomer as a metaphor gives us of Gomer herself, the symbol serves a purpose; it describes a kind of faithlessness in stark terms we

¹³¹ Hosea 3:3

understand, and communicates God's tormented love for us. However, even the most suitable symbols eventually lose their value. Any metaphor has limited use. A classic example of this is the use of the word 'Father' for God. It could have no better provenance, being the word Christ used for God. It communicates love, nurture, strength, commitment, relationship and many other positive things. Yet the experience of earthly and imperfect fatherhood means that for some the value of those meanings is lost. The metaphor does not work for everyone because 'Father' means other things to some people. Added to this is the fact that the word 'Father' never summed up all there is to say about the first person of the trinity, God is more than the metaphor. Even if our experience of fatherhood is so positive that we can embrace the term 'Father' personally it is still inadequate, it cannot communicate all there is to say about God.

This symbol not only makes a woman a symbol of sin, it also has God punish her:

I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born' ¹³²

'I will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand.' ¹³³

This punishment is desired out of anger, to carry it out depends on the greater physical power possessed by the husband and this degradation is of a sexual nature. In another place and time, and perhaps in less lyrical terms we might be sickened by the same threats coming out of the mouth of a drunken abusive husband in a TV drama. Our society neither legally nor socially accepts this kind of behaviour from a husband no matter what wrong the wife may have done. Even the threat would leave him liable to prosecution. Yet, as Sanderson draws attention to in her work on Nahum, 'to involve God in an image of sexual violence is in a profound way,

¹³² Hosea 2:3

¹³³ Hosea 2:10

somehow to justify it and thereby sanction it for human males who are for any reason angry with a woman'.¹³⁴ To the confessing reader, God must be justifiable. Exum draws out the underlying message regarding the 'Bad' woman, 'Bad women are promiscuous and rapacious, and female desire is consuming and dangerous...Male control then is seen as necessary and desirable.'¹³⁵ Or to put it in less sanitised form still perhaps; *she had it coming and it's for her own good.*

So to men it justifies wrongs done to women through the ages, and as West reminds us, also to women it justifies the wrongs they have seen and colluded in being done to women through history.¹³⁶ Also to women it forces an acceptance of guilt for being physical or sexual.¹³⁷ For women, the symbol of Gomer standing for the guilt of the nation demands a capitulation, and as we cannot be good enough to be 'Good' in these terms, we have no choice as women but to believe ourselves 'Bad'.

What was once about power rather than love and sex has then impacted hugely on what we think of love and sex now. As we yield to the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman dichotomy we leave ancient patriarchy in control.

Weems reminds us throughout her book that the audience of the prophets were the men of Israel, and these images were at once shocking and gratifying and as such they seized the imagination of the hearers.¹³⁸ As a method of communication it was no doubt brilliant even if

¹³⁴ Sanderson (1992) p221.

¹³⁵ Exum (1996) p114.

¹³⁶ West, 1995, pp30-47.

¹³⁷ Exum (1996) p103.

¹³⁸ Weems (1995) p13.

in retrospect it is regrettable that society was like that and we are saddled with the consequences.

Yet it is all borne out of an image that is false. Gomer is fantasised and feared into the shape of a character such as Exum argues could never have existed. And the ironic result is that we have now a view of women with those characteristics despite the fact that she was only imagined. This view of female sexuality as sinful through the use of it as a metaphor for wickedness can only be dangerous to women's self image and men's image of them.

What Beeby says about the bride's commitment being borne out of the strength she receives from her husband's commitment is, I find, an extremely challenging use of the metaphor. Certainly it is appropriate in the God human relationship but as a model for a relationship between humans it sounds oppressive. I think it brings into sharp relief the suitability of Gomer as a metaphor for God's people. Ultimately all metaphors have their limitations, and here it is that God's love is more complex than human love. The issues of duty and commitment can be true of God but yet not of human marriage. The Gospel message tells us that only God can save us, no human power can. Forcing the metaphor of this marriage beyond what a human marriage should be like so that Gomer can represent God's people makes for a subservient oppressive marriage. It creates an image of the 'Bad' woman that I have no wish to resign myself to, and makes me recoil from the God it is designed to illustrate.

The message of Hosea critiques the problem in a sense itself; God will love us no matter what. The interest in a woman's virtue is a trick that draws us away from God's grace. Thinking his anger is about human relationships, when it is in fact about Israel's worship of other gods, distracts us. And women can be distracted from God's love itself which is supposed to make

them whole, by a view of women as so unworthy that they are an appropriate symbol for wickedness. Perhaps we are required to remind ourselves that as useful as metaphors may be at times, you cannot confine God's love to a metaphor, it's too big.

I think that Gomer was, in all probability, a woman with a sexual past of some kind. Hosea chose her because God told him to marry a woman of whoredom. However, to choose her and then chastise her for that past seems unfair. It was, after all, the only criterion for choosing her as a wife. In our interpretation we must remember this rather than see Hosea as a man who loves an unfaithful woman. Furthermore, I think it is probably stretching a point to say that the metaphor is a perfect match and Gomer is guilty of all the things Israel is guilty of. Heaping upon her the sins of the nation is in my view a classic case of imagining the 'Bad' woman into existence. She may be a metaphor but she is not a synonym. The idea that because she has a guilty past, or present for that matter, she is wholly 'Bad' is simply cruel. We must measure the verses of Hosea that suggest God may view a human being like this alongside the grace of what else we know about God. It is true that using the comparison of human disgrace to explain a nation's disgrace may be useful. However, we have to be very careful when we do it. Gomer has surely suffered beyond her crimes.

Chapter 4: Jephthah's Daughter

'Thou still unravished bride of quietness'¹³⁹?

'The story opens joyously. We see the maid coming out with timbrels and dances, determined to be the first to meet her father. We read between the lines that they loved each other with perhaps a more than common love for that remote day. Then the blow falls. The terrible vow rises between them, and the girl bows her head beneath its stroke, without a whisper of revolt... her father was the representative of God – 'He for God only, she for God in him.'...In the way she went quietly out to the mountain, and then deliberately stepped forth to die, she has held up a braver ideal to the woman of a softer age.'¹⁴⁰

'Although his daughter has served him devotedly with music and dance, Jephthah bewails the calamity that she brings upon him. And throughout it all God says nothing. With courage and determination the daughter answers her father. Though she is not told the specific content of his vow, the inevitability of his words is sufficient. She does not seek to deny or defy them, nor does she show anger or depression. No sentiment of self pity passes her lips; instead, she feels for her father the compassion that he has not extended to her.'¹⁴¹

Starting Points

Jephthah's daughter appears in the space of just 6 verses of Judges 11. She is part of the wider story of Jephthah which takes up the whole chapter. Her action and words are minimal and her name is not reported. However, her story is dramatic and devastating despite its brevity. Her father is a warrior and he vows to sacrifice whoever first comes out of his home to greet him if

¹³⁹ Keats (1988) p167.

¹⁴⁰ Bone (undated) p52-53.

¹⁴¹ Tribble (1984) p102.

he is granted victory in his battle. It is his daughter who greets him, and he duly sacrifices her as he vowed.

The phrase ‘Thou still unravished bride of quietness’ comes from Keats poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. In this poem Keats is musing on the scene depicted on an urn. He sees in the picture an ordinary scene, there are people playing music outdoors and there is a girl alone, forever just out of the reach of the men who stretch out to her. By his poem he re-immortalises in verse the girl he sees, she is the girl he calls ‘unravished bride of quietness’, captured in a moment in stone and then in verse, silent and solitary eternally. There are clear parallels to what has happened to the character in Judges 11, Jephthah’s daughter. The image of the submissive nameless virgin girl is first frozen at the point of her death in the story, a picture of an obedient daughter. Her legend is then retold in the ancient annual commemoration the text tells us took place in Israel and is again reiterated by the analysis of modern commentaries. Delicate and beyond spoiling the girl is put on a pedestal for us to admire, there she remains an ‘unravished bride of quietness’. But if we give her the reality of a physical presence and a voice and look at her closely is she still someone we want to look up to or seek to live up to?

The girl of the text has nothing physical about her, her voice first echoes her father’s words (v36), and then asks to bewail her virginity (v37), her sexual and maternal roles of the future are sacrificed, she does not protest that she is to die, her name is erased from history and her body is turned to ash and vapour (v39). This last verse sums up her story:

At the end of the two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Judges 11:39

‘She’ who has no name, returned to her father, submissive to him, where *he* did what *he* had vowed, and in case we had forgotten, she had never slept with a man.

Yet it does not stop there; in the retelling and analysis of story her physicality is lost and she is either ignored or reduced to the unreality of a perfect fantasy daughter. The responses of Bone, writing in the earlier half of the 20th century, and Tribble, heralding feminist biblical scholarship in the latter half, share the reverential view of the girl. Her silence and obedience to her father are read as love and courage, and they imply that these are virtues to be admired. Not only disembodied then, but also good.

The Challenge of the Text

The story is Jephthah’s; he is the central character, the reported action moves with him. The text deals a blow in the opening verse, Jephthah is the son of a prostitute, unworthy to inherit along with his legitimate brothers in his father’s house. A son of the Bible’s favourite brand of ‘Bad’ woman, Jephthah is a man clearly in need of restoration as far as the story is concerned. So as is the nature of a story that opens in such a way a redemptive turn of events comes about. The men of Gilead, his father’s land, need him after all, they plead with him to come to their aid and lead the army to fight the Ammonites. He refuses, they plead, offering the rule of the whole land to him if he is victorious. The currently silent God is asked to witness the promise, and the ensuing victory is attributed to him. But then comes the tragic reversal of fortune, Jephthah asks God for a deal, victory for a sacrifice, he makes a vow to seal the bargain. To this point it is without a doubt Jephthah’s story. But then we discover there is his daughter.

How we understand the relationship between Jephthah and his daughter forms the basis of our conclusions about the girl. In the narrative, as well as by his biological relationship to her, the girl is formed in relation to her father. So her father is the starting point in an analysis of her character.

The existence of Jephthah's daughter as a literary character is predicated on the intersection of her actions with the major plot line of the narrative which consists of her father's actions.¹⁴³

So from a narrative point of view the daughter is a flat character, one of those who simply move the plot along. The text makes it clear it is no more interested in Jephthah's daughter than this, it fails to name her, and we know how important a name is from passages just like this, where the death of Jephthah's name along with his daughter is central to his grief.

The dynamic between fathers and daughters is generally speaking interesting fodder for stories. What might we make of Saul and Michal, or David and Tamar if their relationships were the centre of the action? That is the distinctive thing about Jephthah and his daughter; they are alone in the rough and uncertain world of the story of Judges. What then will the story be? A doting father and a recalcitrant daughter, a neglectful father who fails to notice his teenage daughter, or a cosy story of the two united against the world, devoted to one another? But like real fathers and daughters this pair fit no mould. One thing is for certain, the interpretation of the daughter cannot be separated from what we make of the father.

The central problem that the text presents is that Jephthah makes the vow apparently without thought about this daughter, his only child, the only possible source of the continuation of his

line. The commentators, in an effort to preserve some humanity about him, frequently call the vow 'rash'. Jephthah makes his vow failing to foresee the possible regret that he might feel if it is his only child who is the one to meet him, let alone thinking to care about who he might have to sacrifice. To say the vow was rash is just about the only way we can excuse such a heartless action, but the text holds no such easy answer. We are only told the vow is made.

To say the vow is 'rash' suggests that the vow was made hastily, without time for consideration. Whether there was haste we cannot know, but we might well conclude it was made with recklessness as to the consequences. We know he has regret when the daughter is to be sacrificed, but his regret is for himself, left without progeny. He might have foreseen this, but he recklessly made the vow whether it had occurred to him or not.

The more subtle challenge of the story is; why does the girl not protest against her fate? Interpretations like that of Bone suggest that she loved her father so much that she was prepared to submit unquestioningly to the vow.¹⁴⁴ Looked in this light we might well see this as parental fantasy written into a story. I think this is a point where the trap of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman concept comes into play. Somehow Jephthah's daughter's silence (not protesting her dreadful fate) and compliance (returning rather than running away after her trip to the hills) instil in us a belief that she was a good daughter. In fact a good daughter of fantasy, not only does she do everything that she is told, respect her father's choices and honour God, we 'read between the lines' that she loved him too.

¹⁴³ Fuchs (1993) p119.

¹⁴⁴ Bone (undated) pp52-53.

The alternative response, which Donna Nolan Fewell espouses, is that the girl heard the vow made and came out deliberately.¹⁴⁵ This simply puts a different type of perfection on the girl. Suggesting that she is willing to sacrifice herself to either save someone else or to teach her father a lesson. In the assessment she is a disembodied guiding light, a perfect ‘Good’ woman.

The story of this daughter is full of gaps. I am suggesting that filling them with concepts of perfection rather than approximations of ordinariness is dangerous to the reader.

Analysis of Critical Responses

Cheryl Exum writes of Jephthah’s daughter that to tell her story is ‘to make her live again through words’¹⁴⁶. It is for this reason that I believe it is vital to approach her story with care. Ignoring her, praising her or blaming her are all dangerous conclusions in their way.

The favoured conclusion is that Jephthah made his vow hastily, forgetting that his daughter may come out of the house.¹⁴⁷ He is, in the general consensus, at heart a faithful man who would not break his vow to God.¹⁴⁸ As Clinton McCann notes, such thoughtlessness really only makes Jephthah look stupid instead of cruel.¹⁴⁹ McCann goes on to say that we should be wary of judging the fulfilment of the vow as faithfulness to God. From a biblical perspective it is not true to say that it does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.¹⁵⁰ Instead

¹⁴⁵ Fewell (1992) p71.

¹⁴⁶ Exum (1993a) p132.

¹⁴⁷ Valler (1999) p48.

¹⁴⁸ Valler (1999) p49.

¹⁴⁹ McCann (2002) p82.

¹⁵⁰ McCann (2002) p84.

the fulfilment of the vow displays the terrible consequences of not embodying what God wills.¹⁵¹

Traditional commentators such as John Hamlin make no mention of Jephthah's failure to anticipate the possibility of his daughter coming out of the house first. Likewise no comment is made about the likelihood of the submissiveness of the girl to death. He is however quick to praise that submission:

The only redeeming feature of the tragic story of Jephthah's vow is the courageous self sacrifice of his daughter. Her own lament on the mountains of Gilead (11:37-38) was not only to prepare herself for the death which would cut off her life in the prime of maidenhood, but to mourn the fact that her father would have no descendants.¹⁵²

Alberto Soggin comments that it is not worth considering whether the vow is rash or not. He argues that to consider the individuals in the case would be only sentimentality. Instead what is interesting is the case of human sacrifice as a facet of Israelite religion.¹⁵³

Nevertheless the fact that Jephthah apparently forgot his daughter and then bewails the fact that she comes out first is perplexing. It remains so whether we imagine his mourning is for love or self-interest. Fewell has suggested he did not forget. Instead she proposes that the girl might have been present at the occasion of the vow so he would have expected her to stay inside.¹⁵⁴ This reading grants Jephthah's daughter the autonomy of humanity not given to us by the text. The result is that Fewell brings a fuller dimension to the discussion of the girl.

¹⁵¹ McCann (2002) p85.

¹⁵² Hamlin (1990) pp119-120.

¹⁵³ Soggin (1981) p215.

¹⁵⁴ Fewell (1992) p71.

However, the choice that Fewell suggests Jephthah's daughter makes is an extraordinary one. In this interpretation the daughter is still saintly, caring for the person who would otherwise have been sacrificed.¹⁵⁵ The girl is still a good spiritual example to her father, showing him the error of his ways.

Many scholars would have us believe Jephthah loved his daughter and the punishment was as hard on him as her, again to soften our image of the man. Fuchs is among those who credit Jephthah with love for his daughter, though she suggests it is in part how the narrative works in its task of rescuing Jephthah from the role of heartless villain. She is therefore saying that it is the intention of the narrator that we assume this bond.¹⁵⁶ I disagree. Jephthah neither says, nor, more devastatingly, shows this to be true.

Exum is particularly interested in the point when the characters 'die' to the text either by reported death or by the death of silence like Michal. However, though I agree that we cannot know if these people ever really lived, their lives are still bigger than the lives on the page. Beyond death to the text they live in the imagination, and in the case of the Bible, in the spirituality of the reader with the text's epitaph forever framing the judgement on that life. Michal then is a physical woman who nags, Jephthah's daughter is disembodied by her lack of name, her father's neglect and finally by the fire, and she is to be to us 'a brave ideal'. The way that Tribble translates the verses about the girl being remembered by all other women adds yet more distance between the physical reality of the daughter and the spiritual influence that she exerts by her death 'She became a tradition in Israel'.

¹⁵⁵ Fewell (1992) p71.

¹⁵⁶ Fuchs (1993) p127.

Trible considers Jephthah's daughter as an innocent victim. Unjustly and cruelly killed by her father and forsaken by her God who had stepped in to save the son in Genesis' parallel story¹⁵⁷ she is also dishonoured by the way the story is told. Disembodied by 'centuries of patriarchal hermeneutics',¹⁵⁸ which have forgotten the daughter and glorified the father, Tribble holds her up as a good example of a brave woman:

By our memory she is forever hallowed. Though not a 'survivor' she becomes an unmistakable symbol for all the courageous daughters of faithless fathers.¹⁵⁹

His daughter shows him the better way, behaving with dignity and honouring God with her quiet acquiescence. This interpretation seems to deny Jephthah's responsibility for a dreadful vow and it places on the daughter a kind of saintliness devoid of humanity.

Fuchs credits Tribble with calling attention to the daughter and making her the focus of the study of Judges 11. Tribble ensures we cannot continue to ignore the girl.¹⁶⁰ However, Exum sees a danger in Tribble's assertion that the fault is all Jephthah's and the girl is wholly innocent as it reinforces the extremity of the 'victim victimiser dichotomy',¹⁶¹. She also makes the point that 'praising the victim can be as dangerous as blaming the victim',¹⁶² because glorifying the victim by the embracing of the ceremony of the women of Israel we perpetuate the crime. Exulting the girl is to endorse the story. Exum's point goes to the heart of the problem of polarising the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman. The only way to honour the girl without re-sacrificing her is to recognise that 'guilt and innocence are not clear cut'.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 22 The command to sacrifice Issac.

¹⁵⁸ Tribble (1984) p107.

¹⁵⁹ Tribble (1984) p108.

¹⁶⁰ Fuchs (1993) p117.

¹⁶¹ Exum (1993b) p36.

¹⁶² Exum (1993a) pp139-140.

¹⁶³ Exum (1993b) p36.

In an effort to keep a balance in interpretation and not to exalt the girl as victim Fuchs seeks to give the girl a voice. 'To the extent that the daughter's greetings are the effect of her independent initiative she too is responsible for her own death.'¹⁶⁴ Fuchs makes this point in relation to her assertion that the text is constructed to save Jephthah from looking like a brutal father. However Exum goes further and points us to the possibility of allowing a certain amount of responsibility to lie with the victim herself, she failed to protest her fate, and in so failing, took a role in deciding it.¹⁶⁵ Elsewhere Exum extends this point as an example of how women cooperate with patriarchy and allow it to flourish.¹⁶⁶ Fuchs answers the consequent question about how we then approach this text without colluding with any of the oppressive options; she suggests 'critique and resistance rather than mourning',¹⁶⁷. This McCann has effectively managed by concluding that we should remember her in order to remember the horror that disobedience can lead us to.

Response

If, as I suggested above, our interpretation of Jephthah's daughter is drawn from our understanding of Jephthah, it is clearly important to first cast a critical eye over what we have made of him. By any modern standards Jephthah's actions are unspeakable. Even if we are prepared to accept that this story comes from another time and culture with different standards, our rejection of those standards when they are clearly barbaric should be explicit. Otherwise Jephthah is able to claim honour and pity from us, and the horror of both the vow and the act goes without criticism. The sacrifice is not just a girl's death but also the offering

¹⁶⁴ Fuchs (1993) p121.

¹⁶⁵ Exum (1993a) p140.

¹⁶⁶ Exum (1995) p79.

up of her body as a burnt offering, in simpler words, he set fire to his daughter. The reality of this should not be allowed to escape the reader. Even the storyteller is apparently unable to be so open about this and simply refers back to when the vow was made¹⁶⁸ rather than restating what is to be done to her.

Before we call Jephthah noble we might bear in mind that many of the Christians who accept this story as a model of faithfulness would, if it happened today, campaign for Jephthah to be imprisoned.

With Patriarchy's hand clamped firmly over her mouth the girl goes to her death. Are we willing to believe she could possibly have been so silent, so much the perfect example of an obedient daughter? Could any woman be like that?

Yet we read the story and we accept the silence. Both these things divorce Jephthah's daughter from her physical life, the text playing to our desires or maybe it created them. Gomer is seized upon for her promiscuity, Jephthah's daughter for her virginity. Both seem to fascinate as the polarity of what is in both most wanted and most feared. If both writer and reader so accept Jephthah's daughter's disembodiment and read it as a mark of her goodness there must be reasons why.

¹⁶⁷ Fuchs (1993) p118.

¹⁶⁸ Judges 11:31,39.

Efforts have been made in various ways to recognise Jephthah's daughter's wholeness. For example, some commentators have challenged her namelessness by giving her a name, Mieke Bal calls her Bath Jephthah,¹⁶⁹ Exum calls her Bat-jiftah.¹⁷⁰

It is worth considering the facets of the girl that draw admiration. Firstly the idea that it is good that she honours God. As far as honouring God is concerned there is the vast question of how we view God in the passage. He neither speaks to accept the vow nor acts to prevent it, so what are we to make of it? Is the model of the daughter's honour something we believe God wishes us to aspire to?

Secondly there is the possibility that she is good because she is pure. There is of course a thread that runs through Christian thought over centuries which values the spirit and abhors the body. Dualism that requires shame in the body has also fostered the idea that somehow a woman's body is worse still. A woman's body is temptation, or it is the root and perpetuation of original sin.¹⁷¹ Therefore to be a virgin is desirable, to be dead is better still, undefiled and utterly out of reach, like the girl in the image on Keats' Urn.

Thirdly there is also the idea that she makes her father seem better because of her cooperation in her own sacrifice. Thanks to her compliance Jephthah gains association with her other implied 'Good' facets, her faithfulness and her purity. In her father's story the girl is the redeeming feature, she brings to his tragedy the catharsis of the final act. From a human perspective, which takes account of the culture, by sacrificing his daughter Jephthah has lost his bloodline. However, from a narrative point of view he has secured his future by the same

¹⁶⁹ Bal (1988) p43.

¹⁷⁰ Exum (1995) p75.

act. Two women are attached to Jephthah in the story, his mother and his daughter. His mother casts a long shadow over his life by her sexual actions. She taints Jephthah with her character, leaving him as less than heroic and drives him into a bad place in the story, a rootless warrior. Whereas the daughter, a dead virgin, is as far as she could be from the distasteful physical attributes that the mother is hampered with. The daughter is free to be a positive spiritual influence over the story of the man. He is by the end of his story associated with his tragic virgin child, put to death to be faithful to Yahweh; the harlot mother is thus erased.

Imagine if the daughter had not been in agreement. The alternatives would be the sacrifice of a resistant child or the failure to keep his vow. Neither of these alternatives leaves Jephthah in a very heroic light. His daughter is his tragedy, but he remains a hero to most commentators.

What I want to say is not only the obvious 'we cannot be wholly good' but also that one of the reasons we cannot is that a denial of a woman's physical presence is impossible alongside a belief in her liberation to be whole. However, the message that comes through in the telling of this story is a subtle acceptance of the desirability of a disembodied woman; such a woman is a perfect daughter and an implicit role model. Jephthah's daughter is absent to the point of non-existence, even her father forgets the chance that she will come out of the house, how much more disembodied can she be? And for some reason we seem to like this, freed from her physical body which is so fraught with associations and dangers of sin she is free to be a guiding light, a shining, ethereal example.

Jephthah is brought into the story for his capability at winning bloodthirsty skirmishes. It seems to me that it is the desire of the reader, such as a 21st century family minded Christian,

¹⁷¹ Moltmann-Wendel (1994) p42-43.

to see a man who loves his daughter and a daughter who submits to death out of love for him. Jephthah makes no mention in the text of how he feels about his daughter, even when she is to die his concern is for himself. We understand ourselves to have an in-built impulse to preserve our own lives, and yet we are supposed to believe that she submits so quietly? How afraid might she be of her father if death holds less fear than living having defied him? However, it is a less romantic interpretation than it is to say that she fears death less than she *loves* her father and honours God in him. She is a young woman apparently without a mother. The only way we see her father interact with her in these short verses is in anger and in blame.¹⁷² When she speaks it is in immediate compliance which stops his ranting.¹⁷³ Her solution to the problem is not to spend two months with her beloved father but to be alone with her female companions.¹⁷⁴ It is hardly reading against the grain of the actual text to suggest that the girl is afraid of her father, used to his ranting, and has learnt collusive coping strategies. If this seems like an unfair implication of what might be called at best poor parenting and at worst abuse, what happens next? He kills his daughter as a sacrifice.

The fear explanation would be horrific; the version that calls it love is simply tragic. So the romantic interpretation perhaps comes from a familiarity with the narrative mechanisms of what makes a good tragedy. Tragedy in its familiar form as a kind of story has been following the same patterns at least since the Ancient Greeks defined it as a genre. I suspect that we are so familiar with this form, like others that frame our understanding of the way we tell stories, we slide our storytelling and our interpretation into it. Thus Jephthah's daughter's story is retold as a tragedy not as a horrific happening. This calls us to seize on parts of the text and gaps in the text and ignore others.

¹⁷² Judges 11:35.

¹⁷³ Judges 11:36.

A tragedy is, like other types of story, presented for our entertainment, our expectation is to be shocked and saddened, to feel sympathy, weep tears and ultimately reach the catharsis of the story's redemptive features. There are elements that add to the drama, Martin points out for example that the effect of telling us that she is an only child is to 'heighten the tragedy'.¹⁷⁵ The text offers an annual memorial to encourage us to swallow the idea that her death has positive effects. Fuchs complains that our fascination with the structures of the story deflect our interest from the politics of the text. Indeed for Aristotle the structures were the most important element: 'the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of an eye, he [sic] who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt with pity at what takes place.'¹⁷⁶

In the tragedy of the text the daughter is a victim *in* the text, there is a story, there is a hero, armies, wars, and there is a daughter who will die tragically to make us weep with Jephthah, and feel sorry for him as the hero. The text disembodies her by fire and gives her to us as a good example of a faithful and obedient daughter.

In another analysis of the story she is a victim *of* the text, that is to say in looking at that story in which she is a character it is arguable that we can see the text itself as unacceptable as it damages the character.

In a subtler way Jephthah's daughter has become a third kind of victim. In addition to being a victim in the text and of the text she is a victim of interpretation. By being defended as so innocent she is damaged because it robs her of part of her humanity. In seeking to applaud the

¹⁷⁴ Judges 11:37.

¹⁷⁵ Martin (1975) p146.

bravery of the girl and the solidarity of the women the multifaceted reality of any young woman has been forgotten. Interpretations like Tribble's, which is in one sense seeking to reclaim the story for the girl,¹⁷⁷ still forgets she is a whole person, who cannot be wholly good.

The positive epitaph of Jephthah's daughter is written by the text, acted on by the women of Israel and handed on to us by the eulogising of the commentators. This makes the reader a kind of victim in that it binds us to a false understanding of what any person may be. There are two key questions for the reader to ask in order to resist being so bound. Is what is presented as 'Good' as we are told it is? And is it realistic that we are offered a model of a daughter who is wholly good?

A loving daughter saves the man, if she submits quietly there is no one else to protest cruelty, and the text is free from inferring it. A disembodied woman is the positive influence over a complex man's story, when it so easily might have been read another way. A daughter who asserted herself, who screamed in protest and sought to escape her fate, would have presented huge problems to the story.

It could be about love, but it could equally be about power, but 'Good' women don't get involved in power games, except as helpless victims, so it must be love, how nice. You can construct a power story as easily as a love story; we just swallow the love story more easily.

We can berate the text as much as we like for sins of omission towards this girl. However, stories by their nature cannot and do not flesh out every person mentioned. There are problems

¹⁷⁶ Aristotle, cited in Draper (1982) p14.

¹⁷⁷ Tribble (1984) p108.

however in the ‘unfleshiness’ of Jephthah’s daughter; that her character is flat leaves her without the fullness of human presence. What is vital therefore is that confessional readers, looking to the Bible as a source of inspiration and guidance, are assisted in reading the text differently depending on what kind of literature is before them.

However, the genre of the literature is not the end to the difficulty. All stories impact on and inform our view of the world, as when we were growing up children’s books did. As children we were not asked to believe the stories or emulate them necessarily, but they told us things about how life works. How much more then the Bible nurtures our self understanding and expectations of God and each other, when it is often presumed to be inspired, is treated with reverence and is held up as an example. That the women in the Bible are almost exclusively flat characters is subtly telling us something.

The readers therefore have a rocky course to steer, to do justice to the text, to what is there and to what is not there. Acknowledging the text’s own focus and not sidelining Jephthah’s daughter is a difficulty. Trying to breathe life into her and search for her hidden voice is naturally harder still. Yet within this task it seems crucial to me that a respect for the wholeness of each individual’s humanity is still necessary even when discussing a flat character in a historically dubious story. It is so important because the way characters in the Bible are discussed among believers forms a framework for how we understand ourselves and our relationship with God. Apart from the abstract injustice marginalising the women of the Bible, we risk creating an understanding of women before God that continues to marginalize them. This broad point is one that feminist biblical study has been making for a long time. The focus of my interest however lies within that broad argument. The ambiguous character of this girl is frequently taken by the commentators picked out of the text and prodded to find in her a

third dimension. The risk is that in seeking to make her character round they fail to make her whole. The gaps in the text are gaping wide and begging to be filled by interpretation, but too often that interpretation has been drawn towards making a daughter who is perfect within the dictates of the culture she springs from or into. She becomes an incomplete picture of a woman, a mark we are sure to fall short of, and a target we may have no wish to aspire to if we were to stop and think about it. And so filling the gaps and seeking a fuller person out of the fragments that we have in the text risks making a Frankenstein's monster, resembling humanity but lacking the wholeness of God's original creation.

Tribble has raised the girl out of the shadows but has made her too much a heroine. Exum and others see the difficulties but risk abandoning the text without answers that satisfy the questions they have raised. Others as we have seen pretend that there is no flaw in the text, avoiding an interpretation which challenges the implied attitudes of the author and of the characters as well as the commentators who have gone before. Whilst I acknowledge that there are no absolute answers I think there are helpful as well as less helpful approaches. If we are honest about Judges 11 we must surely see that God does not step in to save the girl so we are forced to address the question of where then do we see his grace? Where is the girl's redemption? Faced with Bone's faithful daughter or Tribble's feminist heroine how can we as contemporary Christian women respond?

I think it might be useful to work backwards for a moment. The modern Christian woman, as with all Christian people, knows herself to be whole in Christ and loved and valued by her creator God. With our knowledge of God centre stage we can return to the text and make demands of it. Each new reader has the opportunity to bring reality into the picture. To reject the impossible or cruel interpretations and fill in the gaps in the story with knowledge of what

people are like rather than of how stories work. We can approach the girl in the text with the same belief that all people are created and loved. Looking for the story of this two dimensional child in an obscure part of the Bible with all the respect due to any of humanity is the only way to find a person who is whole. Then when the readers of faith look into the story they may see reflected back the wholeness of humanity, that integration of what is good and bad, which is precisely what is acceptable in the eyes of God, and is redeemed not by standards of perfection but by his grace.

I think that the horror of this story provokes us into seeing only extremes. What happens to this girl is extreme, it does not necessarily follow that her character is equally so. The story tells us that she accepts the consequences of the vow and that she is sad. We have seen the suggestion that her acquiescence is due to extraordinary obedience to her father or greater faithfulness to God than her father displayed. It seems less extraordinary and more poignant to accept that she did as her father promised because she was not aware that there was a choice to defy him. She was not going to grow up, for women of that place and time growing up would surely mean marriage and children. When the Bible says that she bewailed the fact she would never marry, perhaps it simply tells the truth of a girl who would never become a woman and so she cried for the last two months of her life. Not a saint on a pedestal, but a child coming to terms with her own death.

Chapter 5: Delilah

‘Di’laila/n. a seductive and wily temptress’¹⁷⁸?

I can rip out the roar from the throat of a tiger,
Or gargle with fire, or sleep one night in the Minotaur’s lair,
or flay the bellowing fur from a bear, all for a dare. There’s nothing I fear...
But I cannot be gentle, or loving, or tender.
I have to be strong. What is the cure?...
So when I felt him soften and sleep, when he started as usual to snore,
I let him slip and slide and sprawl, handsome and huge, on the floor.
And before I fetched and sharpened my scissors –
snipping first at the black and biblical air – I fastened the chain to the door.
That’s the how and the why and the where.
Then with deliberate, passionate hands I cut every lock of his hair.¹⁷⁹

‘The biblical text gives us a clear picture of Delilah. She was a calculating woman. She was aware of the power her sexuality gave her and quick to use sex for personal gain. While Samson had fallen in love with Delilah, she only pretended affection for him. Delilah was more than willing to let Samson use her body, for she was using him to become rich...Keeping ourselves sexually pure and equally yoked protects us from people like Delilah and is vital for empowering God’s people.’¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Allen (1990) p 306.

¹⁷⁹ Duffy (2000) pp28,29.

¹⁸⁰ Richards and Richards (1999) p102.

Starting Points

At some point in the history of our culture somehow it was agreed upon that Delilah was a character worth hanging on to. Of all my chosen biblical women Delilah is the most famous. Consequently she is the one about whom people are most sure of their opinion. As Carol Smith put it 'Not only have they heard of her, they believe they know what sort of woman she was.'¹⁸¹ Opening this chapter is the dictionary definition of the noun Delilah, a retelling of the story of Delilah in poetry and also a modern Christian response to the biblical woman. The diversity of media in which she still appears is evidence of her impact.

Unlike Gomer, Jephthah's Daughter or even Ruth, popular culture has preserved Delilah rather than just drawn lessons from her story. Women called by the same name carry the associations of the Biblical character. Delilah was still the ruthless heartbreaker in a recent bestseller¹⁸² that she was in the Tom Jones song thirty years ago. Her name has not fallen into the obscurity that most biblical characters live in; Delilah, the independent women of the Samson Saga, still has a life of her own.

The modern reader assesses the woman Delilah, written about in the book of Judges chapter 16, with all this infamy in mind. Something repels us about this woman who gave an Israelite leader into the hands of the enemy. But something also fascinates us about her. I believe it is that fascination that keeps her alive in popular mythology. The problem faced by the biblical reader is that her place in the popular myth is much more black and white than her place in the original story. The story in the book of Judges is shot through with ambiguity.

¹⁸¹ Smith (1999) p93.

It is the popular Delilah rather than the biblical one that Duffy has worked with to write her poem, from which the above extract is taken. Duffy has used the Delilah of popular culture's mythology and woven a reinterpretation that hangs on our preconceptions. The twist that she throws at us is that she rereads Delilah as good, attributing to her worthy motivation. The part she has kept in her telling of the story is the conventional perception of Delilah as a sexual woman. The irony in this literary trick is that it is quite the opposite of what we find in the biblical story. Delilah's role in this story is that of villainess. Her sexual behaviour is implied but not stated categorically.

I have chosen the poem for my introduction because I think its message is even more powerful than the Richards' extract. Where a woman is cast as a 'baddie' in the story of a hero the assumption of sexuality is so strong that it forms enough common understanding for a poet to write for a secular readership relying on it to make her retelling with a twist work.

The quotation from Christian authors Sue and Larry Richards demonstrates what I believe to be the problem for Christian readers responding to the biblical Delilah. The black and white of the popular picture is accepted easily without appropriate criticism and assumptions are made. The attempt to then draw life lessons from a shaky biblical interpretation is unhelpful and dishonest.

¹⁸² Jewell (2000) p30.

The Challenge of the Text

The obvious question to ask when we look at the text of Judges chapter 16 is, can it be fair that Delilah is a byword for manipulative sexual women when she does nothing explicitly sexual in the text of the Judges story?

The truth is, the Bible never actually tells us that Samson and Delilah were physically lovers. It is a gap in the text that is quite reasonable to make assumptions about, however, they are still assumptions. As a word of caution before we scoff and say ‘of course they were lovers’ we might remember the scholarly hesitation in filling the ‘Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor’ gap in a similar way. My dispute is not an attempt to argue for a chaste historical Delilah, but rather it is an enquiry into the reasons behind these popular assumptions. The simple answer seems to be that Delilah’s part in the story is villain where Ruth’s is heroine. With the ‘Good’ girls comes purity and all things spiritual whereas with the ‘Bad’ come all things physical and sexual.

Delilah’s sexual activity is so resolutely understood to be true and so completely entwined with her wicked place in the story that her name is ‘a synonym for “Femme Fatale”’.¹⁸³ As a woman who brings all these associations with her she performs vital functions in the narrative. Her character makes the story work in those ways we have traditionally understood it.

We should not forget this is Samson’s story. Samson is the hero and all the other roles in the story fall in behind this classification. The setting for Samson’s story is an unstable time in

¹⁸³ Exum (1996) P176.

Israel's history¹⁸⁴. People reading or writing the story would look back on this period as dark times. With this background, when certain pointers appear in the text - a barren woman, a messenger of God, a special birth - the scene is set; the audience is anticipating the entrance of a hero. Even before he is born Samson's role in the drama is cast. At this point Israel needs a hero. The narrative will grant one no matter what the unfortunate reality of the character. 'It is clear that God expects great things from Samson'¹⁸⁵ and so, not unreasonably, does the reader. The boy is born and blessed.¹⁸⁶

Our hero wants a wife who is foreign and so forbidden to him, yet the narrative indulges him, just as his parents do. His parents make it physically possible, the narrator makes it intellectually so.¹⁸⁷

Samson boasts, and when his pride is wounded he comforts himself with violence.¹⁸⁸ Killing with the jawbone of a donkey he betrays his Nazarite vows by touching something unclean and acts the barbarian.¹⁸⁹ His conversation with God is better interpreted as the demands of a spoilt child than a great leader speaking in humility to Yahweh.¹⁹⁰ He visits a prostitute and narrowly escapes capture.¹⁹¹ And all along the reader is asked to accept his heroism with generosity about his failings.

We are inclined to read the personal; it remains as the part of the story we can most relate to. However, the plot tells of the ferocity of ill feeling between Samson and the Philistines. 'He

¹⁸⁴ Judges 13:1

¹⁸⁵ Essex (1999) p45.

¹⁸⁶ Judges 13:24.

¹⁸⁷ Judges 14:4-10.

¹⁸⁸ Judges 14:19, 15:6.

¹⁸⁹ Judges 15:15.

¹⁹⁰ Judges 15:18

has wreaked havoc on the Philistines. He has mocked them and destroyed their property and future livelihood. He has callously killed their kinsmen. He has taken advantage of their women.¹⁹²

The story in its wider context is the story of Israel; the animosity with Israel's enemies is a vital part of the plot. The story is told assuming a shared understanding between writer and reader of the importance of this unhappy time in history, when the enemies were even more to be feared. Samson is the hero; this woman of dubious origins takes a kind of power over our hero.

We appreciate that in a sense as we read the story; the Philistines are our enemies, as the reader is asked to identify with the people of Yahweh. However, that enmity does not live in us. So the personal story, the love story of Samson and Delilah comes to the fore, not as an extended metaphor forming part of a wider story but as the central plot in itself.

Having observed all this about the Samson saga we can be fairly confident that it is not Samson's actions that determine his role or the assessment of his character. He is the hero of a political drama with a perilous romantic sub plot. This was decided from before he was born and the personality has little to do with it.

What has happened for the modern reader is I believe that the story has been lifted from its context. All the clues are still there and continue to point us to reading Samson as the hero. The difference is that the weight of the drama has moved. Samson is now the hero of the

¹⁹¹ Judges 16:1-3.

¹⁹² Essex (1999) p47.

romantic drama with a political sub plot. We cannot feel the urgency of the Philistines as enemies. We are more familiar with love and betrayal as primary stories. Set up by the text as one kind of hero, even if we see him through eyes that are used to Hollywood, he is still a hero; the construction of the narrative demands it.

So enter the mysterious Delilah, it is only now after all that context that she enters the story. Be it love story or history lesson it remains Samson's story and she does not appear until we have seen Samson from his birth to strong triumphant adulthood.

The text of the story immediately gives us a list of indications about what we are supposed to think of this woman. Chapter 16 of the book of Judges is, in those Bibles that give headings, entitled 'Samson and Delilah'. Despite this, the opening of that chapter is the account of Samson's visit to the prostitute. Before we are introduced to Delilah herself she is associated with a professional seductress. The first woman we meet in the chapter is a nameless prostitute, how then will the title character Delilah compare? Three verses after his visit to the prostitute Samson falls in love with Delilah. Immediately another black mark is given to her character, she lives in the valley of Sorek. Perhaps she is a foreigner, since Sorek is at the edge of Israelite territory, although her name ending in 'ah' might imply a Yahwistic connection. Also Samson's name means the sun, the name Delilah is derived from the same word as the night, so a metaphor is implied: perhaps the woman will overcome this great son of Israel as the dark overcomes the sun. Added to these negative undertones is the fact that Delilah is rare in the histories of Israel in being named without reference to a male relative. Why is she alone in society? The reader is urged to be suspicious.

All we really learn however is that there is a list of questions that we don't know the answers to about Delilah. Is she also a prostitute? Is she a foreigner? Is she independent? Does her name signify anything? She is mysterious and therefore suspicious. We have questions about her background and we will later be perplexed by her actions. The mystery damns her perhaps more than anything.

The subsequent story does little to solve these enigmas. We learn nothing at all about her feelings for Samson in response to his love for her; instead we are immediately thrown into the tale of espionage.¹⁹³ The greatest mystery in the story is perhaps the apparent simplicity. The lords of the Philistines come to her and offer her money for finding out the secret of Samson's strength. Verse 6 states straightforwardly 'so Delilah said to Samson, "please tell me how you might be so bound that one could subdue you."' He lies to her in his response, and it is proved that it was no idle question when she tries out his answer. So the great question is why does he continue with the charade after each betrayal? Perhaps he does not believe that the Philistines are really there in the inner chamber as she says, but he is not blind yet. It appears that he is not alert to the presence of danger and he is not curious to know why else she would be so desperate to find out his secret. Surely each time he lies he knows that she will try the answer and call out that the Philistines are upon him. There is also the experience he had before of his wife telling his secret to his enemies. He appears to ignore all warnings, and all Delilah's honesty. Ultimately he tells her the true way to bind him, and he is captured.

We do not know that she seduces him. She appears to tell him exactly what she is doing, she does not lie, and he does. We do not know anything about her feelings or motivation.

Analysis of Critical Responses

This is a strange story. The traditional interpretation fails to address many of the questions raised. I would summarise the traditional response as follows: Samson is a good man chosen by God. He has a weakness for the wrong sort of woman, foreign and untrustworthy. He falls in love with Delilah. His enemies buy her loyalty and she seduces and deceives him. As a result of his infatuation he is foolishly trusting and this is his downfall. He loses his strength and is captured.

This is an option as a response to the text and the easy way that readers often swallow it is I believe due to the fact that this response is drawn out of stock responses to stock characters. Or in other words there are enough markers to point us to a solution to the mysteries of the text that we recognise, so we accept them even though they don't actually answer the questions. If Samson were not the hero the ambiguity of the story and its characters, especially the enigmatic Delilah, would be more evident.

In surveying the work of other authors Carol Smith acknowledges that Delilah is a tough character for feminist criticism. She is not a good model and she is hard to redeem.¹⁹⁴ But she also points out that 'Samson was, apparently, fascinated by her. Scholars still are.'¹⁹⁵ I have grouped the responses of the commentators into subject areas: Delilah's place in the narrative, perceptions of her wickedness, and her sexuality.

¹⁹³ Judges 16:5

¹⁹⁴ Smith (1999) p108-109.

¹⁹⁵ Smith (1999) p93.

Considering first Delilah's place in the narrative: contemporary authors such as Cheryl Exum, have tracked the shifting sands of retellings of stories like Delilah's in modern media. The subtleties that these commentators observe illustrate precisely how the construct of the narrative drives the interpretation. If we alter the role of one key character the whole story alters. Duffy's poem in the introduction to this chapter is a case in point. By learning in the story of the poem that he wants to be gentle her sin is excused, she was bending to his wishes. Despite the woman in Duffy's description being powerful and in control of herself it is still Samson's character that drives the interpretation. It is Samson's story; there is no Delilah without Samson. Duffy does not break the rules of the story; she uses them just as the first narrator did. The Samson story is a case study in stock responses, stock characters.

Exum's view is that the character of Delilah has passed into popular culture as larger than life.¹⁹⁶ The commodity she has become, embellished and adapted, cannot be controlled by the ancient text, and neither can it be accounted for by it.¹⁹⁷ To the text itself Delilah is to Exum simply a plot function, designed to move the narrative along and disappearing from it when her work is done.¹⁹⁸ But opinion varies as to what that function is. These different interpretations lead to different analysis of the woman herself.

Danna Nolan Fewell points out that there has been a cycle of events before Samson from which he begins to deviate. Before (2:11-19) Israel does evil, Yahweh gives them up to enemies, Israel cries to Yahweh, Yahweh raises a deliverer, deliverer defeats enemy, the people are faithful to Yahweh while the deliverer is alive.¹⁹⁹ Samson breaks the rules. Nobody

¹⁹⁶ Exum (1996) p176.

¹⁹⁷ Exum (1996) p179.

¹⁹⁸ Exum (1996) p184.

¹⁹⁹ Fewell, (1992) p67.

cries to Yahweh and this hero makes himself unclean.²⁰⁰ These are darker more chaotic times than Israel has known before. 'He lives his life in violation of Yahweh's covenant...Israel's leadership sinks a long way from Moses to Samson.'²⁰¹

However, Essex takes this a step further and sees the story as that of a thug²⁰² who disappoints the promise he had.²⁰³ She goes on to suggest that Samson is not just a symptom of Israel's degradation he is a metaphor for Israel itself.²⁰⁴ 'Delilah's story is symbolic of the depth to which the proud nation has fallen.'²⁰⁵

Smith has another take altogether, rather than a symbol of a failed nation the story is all about different kinds of power. To her, what Delilah wields is real power.²⁰⁶ But Exum challenges that idea with her assertion that Delilah's power still serves male interests,²⁰⁷ which is a reasonable point. Delilah's autonomy is one of the tempting pieces of the story for the modern reader to seize upon to make us feel more comfortable with stories like these. Essex agrees with the idea that Delilah is an accomplice to patriarchy saying 'Her story says to men, "Watch out for those foreign women; they will destroy men every time. Use women, but do not fall in love with them. Love women, and they will betray you!"'²⁰⁸ This leads on to another interpretation. Rather than a warning to the whole of Israel about fidelity to God, some argue that it is a personal warning about the dangers of women, a personification of the 'Bad'

²⁰⁰ Fewell (1992) p72.

²⁰¹ Fewell (1992) p68.

²⁰² Essex (1999) p46.

²⁰³ Essex (1999) pp44,45.

²⁰⁴ Essex (1999) p51.

²⁰⁵ Essex (1999) p51.

²⁰⁶ Smith (1997) p46.

²⁰⁷ Exum (1993) p89.

²⁰⁸ Essex (1999) p51.

woman in Proverbs. As Exum puts it 'The story provides an object lesson in the danger of love.'²⁰⁹

Barbara Essex in her book *Bad Girls of the Bible* makes a vital point that I have not seen commented on elsewhere at all. 'His character flaws are his undoing – yet Delilah is blamed for his downfall.'²¹⁰ This simple sentence summarises how a hero may seem to have his guilt for anything purged by the presence of a woman to absorb it. Samson is, by anybody's standards, a nasty piece of work. He takes what he wants when he wants it and his first thought if his pride is wounded is to wreak terrible and bloody revenge on everyone who crosses his path.

Exum claims that no one ever assumes Delilah is an Israelite despite her Hebrew name and the location of her home being as likely to be Israelite as Philistine. Her interpretation of this oversight is that of course she is assumed to be Philistine, no Israelite woman would do such a thing.²¹¹

Smith,²¹² Exum,²¹³ Fewell²¹⁴ and Bach²¹⁵ all make the point that little separates Jael²¹⁶ and Rahab,²¹⁷ the heroines, from Delilah, the wicked woman. If she were an Israelite helping the foreigners Delilah would come out as a heroine to the Philistines just as Jael and Rahab are heroines to Israelites. The only real difference is that the man that Delilah betrayed is on our

²⁰⁹ Exum (1996) p197.

²¹⁰ Essex (1999) p49.

²¹¹ Exum (1995) p80.

²¹² Smith (1997) p46.

²¹³ Exum (1996) p201.

²¹⁴ Fewell (1992) p74.

²¹⁵ Bach (1997) p186.

²¹⁶ Judges 4:17-22.

²¹⁷ Joshua 2, 6:25.

side. Conversely if Delilah is a Philistine, she is simply a patriot. This point is alluded to in *Samson Agonistes* Milton's famous ponderings on Samson's greatness and misery. Despite the penitential tone of Milton's 'Daliah',²¹⁸ she mentions how in her country she will be honoured.²¹⁹ Such honour may remind us of Jephthah's daughter. Yet still how many Christians let alone non-Christians know detail of Jephthah's daughter, Jael or Rahab, nothing like the number who know of Delilah? She is a concept in the popular consciousness beyond her function in the plot.

Exum argues after an examination of the scant evidence about Delilah's character that there is a subconscious conspiracy against the woman. Her subjective voice is suppressed and latent messages are encoded in the story. The tale told in Judges 13-16 recognises two kinds of women, 'Good' and 'Bad'. A variation on the age-old theme of the virgin/mother on a pedestal and the whore/fallen woman scorned and looked down on. Delilah is grouped with the others who have led Samson astray sexually and caused him harm. 'Delilah is a 'Bad' woman'.²²⁰ Having concluded that Delilah's ethnicity is suspect Exum continues that the narrator does not need to make anything explicit about the dangers of foreign women. It can simply be assumed that the audience already holds the relevant prejudices.²²¹

In an effort to be positive about Delilah, Fewell makes much of her being her own agent and initiating action. Whilst this is a helpful antidote to the idea that any kind of assertion on the part of a woman is negative, I am not sure that the claim is true. In the text Delilah only really responds. It is Samson's love for her. It is the lords of the Philistines who commission her.

²¹⁸ Milton's spelling.

²¹⁹ Milton (1968) p87.

²²⁰ Exum (1996) p186.

²²¹ Exum (1996) p188.

When no one has any more use for her she is no longer in the text. This is simply another point on which we have to be careful not to attribute to Delilah more than is there. Essex has a cheerfully realistic approach, happy to see Delilah as a pragmatist making her own way in a flawed world, the deal with the Philistines a 'solid pension plan'.²²²

If we are talking about what makes Delilah dangerous, her sexuality is of course the central factor. Exum refers to male attraction to and fear of female sexuality.²²³ This is a similar phenomenon to the fascinated repulsion evident in responses to Gomer. However, Delilah's sexuality manifests itself in a slightly different way. What we know of her sexuality is all implied. Really it is her independence that most crucially indicates that this woman has control over her own sexuality in a way that is unusual for that place and time. Exum comments on Delilah's independence²²⁴, but she also points out, not only what we have already considered, that there is no direct evidence for Delilah's sexual relationship with Samson but also that there is no indication of her promiscuity either. Samson is the one with a past, and Delilah is the one called a harlot.²²⁵ She goes on to say:

The popular identification of Delilah as a prostitute partially satisfies the need for motivation. A harlot can be bought for betrayal as well as for sex. No one expects fidelity from her. Already considered morally reprehensible, her nature is to dissemble.²²⁶

Mieke Bal has a different take on what it is about Delilah that is threatening. She comments on the relationship between strength and sexuality. She argues that according to the relevant

²²² Essex (1999) p51.

²²³ Exum (1996) p177.

²²⁴ Exum (1996) p181.

²²⁵ Exum (1996) p186.

²²⁶ Exum (1996) p199.

paradigm in our culture the relationship between seduction and treason is unavoidable and fatal.²²⁷ I would go beyond this to say that, in the interpretation of the Bible, any kind of assertiveness of women's physical presence is often equated with sexuality and sinfulness. So it seems reasonable to wonder whether it is in fact her strength rather than her betrayal that causes her to be remembered as such a *femme fatale*? Smith points to what is ultimately the crucial question 'A great deal depends, then on whether one believes Delilah is condemned because of the perceived sexual component in her behaviour, or because she is a betrayer.'²²⁸ What Smith and Bal contribute here is helpful in understanding what has happened with both the biblical Delilah and the popular one that I spoke of in the introduction to this chapter. The answers to the questions they raise will help us to reconsider assumptions that we have made in using familiar paradigms.

However it is important that we do not leave our reflections as deconstruction but rather look for new or evolving responses. I am especially interested by what Alice Bach has to say as she begins to suggest a move beyond the traditional deconstruction techniques of such scholars as Exum, which while eye opening can leave us without the tools to respond as people of faith at the end of our discussions. I believe that our study can move us towards God and open his word to us more rather than only taking it to pieces and criticising where we have been led astray.

Bach perceives the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman polarity as part of a wider tendency in the consideration of biblical narratives to interpret binary opposites: Divine/Human, Jew/Gentile, Male/Female. Her response is to call for an avoidance of building our reading of the texts

²²⁷ Bal (1987) p38.

²²⁸ Smith (1997) p49.

around stock characters. She asks us to avoid assigning labels such as victim or agent. Her approach would be more pluralistic. To stop looking for unified models.

Response

Delilah is 'Bad' because the story says so, and to make that work she has to be the whole 'Bad' woman character, a temptress, a femme fatale, all the things which are attributed to her by interpretations like the Richards'.

We are never told what Delilah's feelings are, let alone her motivations. Her character is discerned entirely from context and action. The little speech she does have is curious when we come to analyse it. It is not conventional seductive manipulation. However we rarely come to analyse it.

Responding to Alice Bach's challenge perhaps we can hope that the ever-growing recognition of the problem of the false 'Good' and 'Bad' women divide is in fact part of the solution. We acknowledge that such distinctions are not true. Perhaps it is a golden opportunity that our cultural heritage enshrines some of the stories of our faith because it gives the opportunity to retell them in the light of understandings like Bach's, without the shackles of the stock characters.

Delilah informs the understanding of women in both secular and religious culture. This understanding encourages a hollow reading of ourselves as women, and distances us further from the wholeness that we too are supposed to come to in union with Christ. We need to recognise we actually know very little about Delilah.

There are good arguments for making Delilah Samson's physical lover; it would be naïve to suggest otherwise no doubt. But for something that is not in the text to be given such emphasis suggests another agenda. If Delilah had helped Samson to escape rather than delivering him to his enemies would such attention be given to her sexuality? No, because 'Bad' women are sexual and 'Good' women are not.

Which brings us to a new issue, it is one thing that Delilah has a place in the book of Judges and the characterisation works a certain way leaving a certain picture of Delilah and so on. But there is also something beyond. As with the critical discussion of Gomer there is something somehow in the nature of the wicked woman that fascinates as well as repulses the audience. And as a result Delilah's allure as a character has equalled if not outshone our hero Samson's in popular culture. All of this is vastly out of proportion to the amount of her appearance or even her significance in the story.

Picking up on Bal's point about the connection between strength and sexuality I am left wondering whether Delilah's greater failure in the eyes of the commentators is that she was a nagging woman. Nagging is a peculiarly female sin and there is precedent for biblical women being condemned for it. Michal the wife of David is accused of nagging. She strode out of the house and told David what she thought about him cavorting in the street. The text banished her, the commentators reviled her.

The incident defies the way we know life works, if someone betrays us we are suspicious of them. If they continually betray us we trust them less and less. In essence she is honest and he deceitful, and he tells the truth in the end through weariness not through her duplicity.²²⁹

The sapping of Samson's strength is not the end to the political story; the enemy is still to be defeated. But when the woman he loves betrays him, Samson dies as a lover and he is rendered impotent by her scissors. The threat of the 'Bad' woman realised, both man and his people are humiliated and weakened. Samson must make atonement for his sexual error to restore his place among the heroes of Israel. Jephthah overcame his obscure birth by attaching his memory to a virgin who he sacrificed to honour Yahweh. Samson sanctifies his distasteful connection with the wily foreign temptress with a suicide mission to wipe out the enemy in the temple of another god, wiping the slate clean.

This extraordinary story leaves us a wealth of possible conclusions, all of them unsatisfactory. The reading that we are used to is this; Delilah has cast some kind of spell with her sexuality to lure him to his fate. The Richards' interpretation, of which there is an extract at the opening of this chapter, is an unashamed example of this.

Samson the good half of the partnership had genuine feelings and as the Richards' have it 'Samson was blinded by passion and was easily manipulated by Delilah'²³⁰

I am inclined to think that Delilah is considered so very bad because she has to be. It is much safer to call her names than to admit that ordinary woman could do such a thing as betray a

²²⁹ Judges 16:16.

²³⁰ Richards and Richards (1999) p102.

man who made himself vulnerable to her. She must be a femme fatale, larger than life.²³¹ If ordinary women were capable of things like this then we wouldn't be able to sleep safe in our beds ever again. But this is only a partial solution. I believe that the fascination in the Bible with such women is because the male writers and their intended audience know that by sublimating a facet of women they have lost something. And these women who are outside the bounds of what is acceptable wear this something openly. It is not so much a yearning for the whore as yearning for the assertive or physical part of the image of God reflected in the women over which they long ago drew a veil.

As far as we know, Delilah is a woman without male support.²³² In her place and time this leaves her with a problem. Samson's appearance and subsequent attachment to her presents her with an opportunity. She could probably marry him if she wanted to; he loves her, he is single and she clearly has skills in getting what she wants out of him. However, if she does not want to be married to him she still has the problem of lack of support. The Philistines offer produces another opportunity.²³³ She can sell the secret of a man she does not love to his enemies and be financially secure for life. No one could claim her action to be justifiable. It is a cruel kind of pragmatism. However, if Samson were not the hero of the story we might be prepared to think he got what he deserved, having wreaked havoc in his lifetime and caused a good deal of cruelty himself. We might also despise him for his stupidity; he could have foreseen what her honest desperation to know his secret would cause. After all, she practised every other way to bind him that he suggested; of course she would do the same again.²³⁴ I do

²³¹ Exum (1996) p176.

²³² Judges 16:4.

²³³ Judges 16:5.

²³⁴ Judges 16:6-21.

not see Delilah as a seductive and wily temptress, but rather as hard hearted and prepared to exploit another person's emotions for her own gain.

There is something about Delilah's story that fascinates us. She has become part of our cultural heritage in a way that none of our other characters have. The popular Delilah, the true femme fatale, is a clear-cut case. The biblical one is more unresolved. We do not know where she comes from or why she behaves as she does. We do know that she breaks conventions by living without a male relative and betraying a man who loves her. We do not know how she feels about him; we do not know for certain that she had a sexual relationship with him. The popular Delilah is a glimpse of a wild and unknowable female; the biblical one is a little more practical. The enthusiasm for her sexuality surely says more about the reader than it does about this inscrutable woman from the valley of Sorek.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

‘A little bit of everything all rolled into
one’²³⁵

In the introduction to this study I suggested that there is a presumption that women are divided into two categories, ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’, both in culture and in the Bible. I began by referring to a simple nursery rhyme, ‘There was a little girl who had a little curl...’ The apparently innocent nursery rhyme is evidence from culture of how, for women, in small ways the two extremes of good and bad are pushed apart, and the in-between goes unacknowledged. This short text sums up the tension that I discovered throughout the study: on the one hand the stereotyping is clear and we may acknowledge its negativity. However there is also a truth conveyed in the simple story, children can be angelic and demonic by turns. The story uses the device of hyperbole to capture our attention for a moment. The nursery rhyme does not need to acknowledge the wholeness of women; it is only a nursery rhyme. However the Bible and our interpretation of the Bible matter a great deal if we are looking for role models and guidance. I then observed a further difficulty arising within the categories of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ women; the ‘Good’ woman becomes de-physicalised and spiritual and the ‘Bad’ woman becomes hyper-physical.

²³⁵ Brooks and Peiken (1997).

Having set out this problem in the introduction I then turned to look at specific female characters who display different facets of the issue I have outlined. I considered Ruth because she has some physicality denied because she is so 'Good'. In contrast stands Jephthah's daughter who has so little which is physical that she gains the interpretation of 'Goodness'. I chose Delilah because she is 'Bad' in the story and so is interpreted to have a strong physicality, and Gomer whose physicality is mentioned so she is presented as 'Bad'. In each case I first looked at the text itself, noting the challenges each character's story presents. I have then surveyed critical responses and concluded with my own analysis, exploring what weaknesses there are in how characters are handled by both the text and the responses.

I have discussed these issues by looking at the treatment of these four women who test the limits of my theory by their differences. Ruth is of course the subject of her own entire book and has a strong place in the Christian tradition. Delilah occupies only a chapter of the book of Judges but as I have shown she is perhaps the most well known of the four, certainly outside the faith communities that use the Hebrew Scriptures. This simple comparison immediately lends credence to the idea that the 'Good' spiritual woman takes a back seat where the physical 'Bad' woman is more visible. Gomer is from the prophetic literature and so I have explored her particular use as a symbol, but I have also shown how the same principles of the 'Bad' woman stereotype apply. However Gomer and Delilah are very different sorts of 'Bad' women. Jephthah's Daughter, in the most horrifying of stories, is perhaps the most invisible of 'Good' women. Despite her death as a sacrifice she is not referred to in the text by name.

I have shown how Ruth is idealised by many of the scholars who comment on her, from Bone's 'winsome girl' to Tribble's feminist hero. In reading these commentaries on the character I was led to ask the question which I went on to use as the title to Ruth's chapter. Is

she in fact 'too good to be true?' This question goes beyond a fruitless discussion of whether or not the events happened, to the more conceptual question: can any woman be so good? If not, the characterisation owes more to the 'Good' woman 'Bad' woman stereotype than it does to the reality of women. Clearly, in answering this question, it was necessary first to consider the text itself and then analyse the scholarly response.

The text allows us to see some of the ambiguity in Ruth's story. However, I have also considered how the structure and emphasis of the story bear a great deal of responsibility for distracting us from some of the brutal events in the narrative. The text is, I believe, trying to prove that good can come out of unexpected places, people and events. Consequently the positive spin it puts on Ruth is understandable in the context. However, the main point is not about what a good girl the character Ruth is. There is a comparison here with the story of Delilah. Centuries later, without the political context of the time being a reality in our lives, the story becomes more personal than it was perhaps intended to be. The hints in the ancient text become fuller characterisations for us in our time because it is what we can most relate to. Hence the 'Good' and 'Bad' women, here Ruth and Delilah, are pushed further into the categories I have described.

The ambiguities in Ruth's story and character, which I have suggested the narrative allows us to see, centre around two questions. Why did she go with Naomi rather than return obediently with Orpah? And what happened on the threshing floor with Boaz? When these questions are taken seriously, Ruth is more than the domestic heroine that I have said she has been reduced to.

Despite these hints of behaviours that do not conform to the 'Good' woman stereotype, the text creates a trap as well. This trap is I believe, to read the 'Good' outcome for the nation of Israel as a 'Happy' ending for Ruth. If we do this, we are forgetting the bondage of her situation and her silencing by the end of the story.

Ruth's excursion into a world without a providing male tempts us to believe that she is independent and finds her way back to patriarchy's prison all by herself, thus making her a safe heroine. It is therefore the feminist writers who are most at risk of falling for Ruth's charms. She is willingly offered as a heroine for women. We can mistakenly accept her without thinking, because we are eager for any heroine at all.

If the happy ending is believed, the dark desperation of Ruth's situation is forgotten. The seediness of the threshing floor scene is re-remembered as romance. The boldness and belligerence is called love and devotion. The action in adversity becomes submissiveness to Naomi. I have shown how these attributes contradict the text, which at least leaves some of Ruth's character open for interpretation.

I have come to believe, as a result of my study, that it does not matter what happened on the threshing floor or why Ruth clung to Naomi. What matters is if we deny the ambiguity of the situation and insist that because this is a 'Good' story with a 'Happy' ending, the character must be this 'Good' woman from whom we have erased all deviousness and sexuality.

Doob Sakenfeld is a good example of how easy it is to succumb to the temptation to idolise Ruth. Although she acknowledges that the easy interpretations of the book have been reached too quickly, she repeatedly comes back to Ruth as the embodiment of *hesed*. The word *hesed*,

meaning loving loyal action, is key in the book of Ruth. Doob Sakenfeld cannot help but identify Ruth with it, reducing the character to the kind of disembodied spiritual presence that I have described in my introduction.

I have also shown an alternative route to the same trap in the book of Ruth. In this interpretation Naomi gains all of the negative associations of a 'Bad' woman so that Ruth can be free to exemplify the 'Good' woman in all her glory. Fewell and Gunn have, I suggested, gone down this road, they place a great deal of emphasis on the scheming, nagging Naomi. This effect I have described as a 'cleansing' of one character, by another character absorbing all the negative interpretation. What Naomi does for Ruth in Fewell and Gunn's interpretation, Jephthah's daughter does for Jephthah in most of the commentaries. The negative associations of his illegitimate birth and even his horrifying vow and the decision to follow it through with killing his daughter are suppressed by his connection with his daughter; the 'Good' woman.

I asked the question 'Could Ruth not be an inspiration even if she is only, like the rest of us, a mixture of good and bad with a lot of in between?' Used by God, not because she was special, but because God is great. For me this is the crucial point in my analysis of the character of Ruth. The pretence about the nature of women, even if it is an attempt to show us something about God, does not bring glory to God because it is not founded in truth. In my opinion Ruth is quite manipulative in managing to keep everyone happy and secure her own future. Her actions are dubious at times, and yet God works through her.

The next character I discussed was Gomer in the book of Hosea. The pitfall with Gomer is, I have suggested, that she is less a character than a symbol. Because she is used as a symbol she gains the associations of that to which she is compared, in this case faithless Israel. The central

problem with the analysis of Gomer is that being used as a symbol degrades her and her character is secondary. This has led to further abuse by scholars who are inclined to forget her humanity.

In the text the character of Gomer is elusive. There are questions about which parts of the text actually refer to her. I have explored the reasons why different parts of the text are linked to Gomer. The lines which we can be sure refer to Gomer tell us very little about her character, they tell us only that she becomes Hosea's wife and that she bears three children. I have found that although there are few lines that are specifically about Gomer she is assumed to be synonymous with the wider symbol of the whore and the faithless wife. Once again this is because Gomer is only a symbol and therefore indistinguishable from the unnamed metaphor which stands for Israel. Gomer is the shadowy face of reality behind the symbol. She grants us an insight into the humanity that is undermined by the use of a woman as a symbol for wickedness. Gomer is a wife and a mother, somebody's daughter and a person in her own right. The use of her as a symbol is degrading and seduces us, the readers, into a place where it is acceptable to talk about a woman in a certain way because she is not real. But I have come to the conclusion that it is unacceptable to speak of even a fictional or metaphorical woman in a way that is degrading. Firstly, because in one sense she is real, even if only in the minds of those who discuss her. Secondly, it is wrong because it impacts on the subconscious beliefs concerning how it is appropriate to think of, or speak of, real women today.

Another difficulty presented by the text is that Hosea is associated with God through the metaphor, just as Gomer is associated with Israel the whore. Clearly this comparison, designed to illuminate the wrath and mercy of God, means that Gomer suffers in the comparison.

For me the greatest challenge of this entire study is not what the scholars say about the women, although this is at times troubling, it is the language about and treatment of women by God. In this story God seems to be prepared to use a woman as a symbol for wickedness. He has told Hosea that he should take a wife of whoredom; he has described brutality towards a woman as a metaphor for how he feels about Israel. The comparison with Jephthah's Daughter seems obvious here; in that story God is silent as Jephthah implicates God in human sacrifice. I believe we must conclude that God will not intervene in the exercise of free will even where his name is cited as cause for violence. This theme has clear parallels with so-called 'just wars' all through history and in the present day. So, appalling as it is, we may at least see something familiar about God in it. However, for me the apparent collusion with the men who would treat a woman as God describes in Hosea's prophecy remains disturbing.

There is, as I have explored, an apparent fascination in the critical responses to the text with the whoredom of Gomer and the metaphor that shrouds her. I have suggested that this fascination is a result of God's sanction of the relationship. Hosea is commanded to marry a 'Bad' woman. The relationship, which would normally be banned, is permitted, and there is understandable allure in the fact.

I have concluded that Gomer has been treated unfairly. Her sexual past seems likely because it is why Hosea went looking for her. Her association with Israel through the metaphor adds to her offences unjustly. Gomer should not be forced to carry the sins of the nation and in the interpretation of this passage this must always be borne in mind.

There is also, I believe, a fantasy element in the treatment of Jephthah's daughter. Her name is not recorded. Her father drives the action in the story; Jephthah makes a vow to sacrifice the

first person to come out of his house if he wins a battle. Like a film star who dies young, Jephthah's daughter is immortalised and idealised by her death. The text emphasises her virginity, the commentators emphasise her obedience. Her physicality is lost. Jephthah is the central character, once again casting comes into play. Cast as the hero, Jephthah invites us to see the tragedy as his not hers. The girl has no name; Jephthah's regret is that his name will be lost.

The vow is central to the story. I have shown how commentators frequently refer to the vow as 'rash'. I have suggested that this underplays it. It is more than hasty, it is reckless and cruel, and whoever it was who came first out of the door, it would still have been cruel. The conclusion favoured by the commentaries is that having made an impulsive vow, Jephthah nobly fulfils it, encouraged by his still nobler daughter. This may be a model daughter's response in some father's eyes, but I have argued that this self-sacrifice is beyond credulity.

Another obvious question that I have looked at is 'why does the girl not protest?' The possibilities I have explored are that she was submissive to her father's will, that her protest has been silenced by the text or that she is a fantasy devoid of humanity. The latter explanation is found in the works of both traditional commentators and modern feminists.

There is, I have observed, a desire among the commentators to soften the edges of this harsh story. We are urged to forgive Jephthah. We are urged to believe the punishment was as bad for him as for her. Or it is suggested that she was present at the making of the vow so she is complicit. Others place the blame on the father, yet still soften the story by seeing the daughter as admirable. Tribble sees the girl as a brave example to women. Exum alone sees 'that guilt

and innocence are not so clear cut',²³⁶ that in her silence the victim takes a role. I have argued that our first conclusion must be horror, and that our rejection of Jephthah's view of God must be explicit. We must also decide if we are willing to believe her silence. If we are willing we must know what we make of it. Are we able to believe that any woman could respond so passively for positive reasons?

I have challenged the assumption that she is good or that she is a role model. I have disputed the idea that her compliance honours God or that she redeems her father's sins by her self-sacrifice. I have argued that the supposition of love for or from the daughter says more about the reader and what would be a fantasy daughter to them. I have suggested that we consider fear rather than love on the daughter's part to account for her submission. Love helps us accept this story and see Jephthah as a tragic hero. Fear would reveal the brutality.

Jephthah's daughter is a victim, a victim of her father's vow in the story. She is the victim of the structure of the story that hides her wasted life. Finally she is a victim of interpretation that sanitises her death.

Putting this debate aside for a moment I have also commented that this story highlights the problem of one-dimensional characters in the biblical context. Some of what Jephthah's daughter lacks is because she is only in the story for a few verses. There are always going to be minor characters. The difficulty that I have discussed is the nature of the Bible in contrast to other literature. The Bible is used for taking lessons for life and for understanding God. The small characters can undermine what the Bible says elsewhere. This is a particular problem for women because there are so few major female characters. Naturally then, women look to these

²³⁶ Exum (1993b) p36.

small characters and the omissions in how they are treated are more problematic as a result. This is a problem that underlies all of the characters I have discussed, although it is particularly present in the discussion of Jephthah's daughter. When interpretation fleshes a character out it can be to serve a point and may take us further from reality than the text did in the first place.

My question is 'where is God's grace in the story'? I have argued that it is not in Bone's 'faithful daughter' or in Tribble's 'feminist hero'. The modern Christian woman with her knowledge of her creator and saviour has the opportunity to bring reality into the picture and reject the interpretations that deny it. It is simpler to see a sad young girl, unable to defy her father, mourning the fact that she will never grow up.

On the subject of Delilah I have observed that there is a popular Delilah as well as a biblical one. The biblical Delilah is the one with more unresolved questions about her. We know that she gets the hero into trouble. We do not know that she had a sexual relationship with him.

I have discussed the general enthusiasm for seeing her as sexual, especially in comparison to Ruth and the ambiguity of the threshing floor. The commentators generally see Ruth as pure and entirely non-sexual. My conclusion is that Ruth's goodness obliterates her sexuality, whereas Delilah's villainy emphasises hers.

The structure of the story has a classic hero figure in Samson. Of course Samson is in fact an extremely ambiguous character. However, his place in the story is that of the hero. Delilah is therefore interpreted through eyes that see Samson as a hero. When we are able to

acknowledge the difficulties Samson presents as a hero, we are more likely to see nuance in the character of Delilah.

The political story between the Philistines and the people of Yahweh is hard for us to relate to. I have suggested that the personal story of love and betrayal is more immediate to the modern western reader. This upsets the balance of the story for the purposes of the interpretation, and all to Delilah's detriment.

Delilah's story is, in fact, a catalogue of mysteries. She has no apparent male means of support and we do not know why. There is the possibility that she is a prostitute. She lives near foreign territory and she may be foreign. If she is foreign this perhaps makes her behaviour reasonable. In contrast since her name has a Yahwistic ending she may be a Hebrew. It seems strange that she tries openly to find Samson's secret. The fact that Samson then tells her the secret despite her openness is even stranger.

I have shown how traditional interpretations do not answer these questions satisfactorily. Some of those interpretations do not even acknowledge the difficulties. Despite the dictionary definition of Delilah as 'a seductive and wily temptress' she is not as deceptive as Samson is.

Some commentators have, I have observed, demonstrated how linked the characters of Samson and Delilah are, the view of Delilah flowing from the assessment of Samson. So for Duffy, the poet who sees Samson as cursed by his strength, Delilah is compassionate. For Essex, Samson is like the people of God at this time, full of promise now disappointed. Consequently, Delilah is an unsuspecting accomplice to patriarchal attitudes to women: the wicked woman tempting the man to his downfall. Others point us to the fact that Samson is

our hero, we the inheritors of the title people of God. If we were instead descendants of the Philistines and Samson was our enemy, we would admire her.

Exum considers the fascination with Delilah's sexuality. She suggests this comes from the unusual status Delilah has as a woman in charge of her own sexuality. However, Exum also reminds us that there is no real evidence for her sexual behaviour. Samson has a past we know about, Delilah does not. Smith points to Delilah's strength as a factor that has contributed to Delilah's negative evaluation. Bach uses Delilah's mystery to call for us to stop looking for unified models in biblical interpretation. She sees that interpretation often looks for binary opposites such as the 'Good' or 'Bad' woman. Bach instead suggests we seek to be more pluralistic.

In my response to the text and its interpretations I have emphasised the fact that we know very little about Delilah. When we recognise the ambiguities she leaves us with, we are more likely to see the agenda in the certainties that are suggested about her.

I have shown how Delilah confirms that women who do bad things are habitually considered to be sexual women. However, I have not suggested that she is in fact virginal. In considering a character so unusual it seems more important to record the uncertainties about Delilah, rather than to guess at what fills the gaps. We cannot glean from the text her motivation, nor can we reconcile all of her contradictions with any model to account for her actions. What we do get from Delilah is a rare glimpse of facets of women that the Bible rarely shows us. In my estimation she is unconventional, able to be cruel and practical about her own survival.

The women I have studied for this project are all players in a greater story. As a result of this the story is never entirely about them. This of course influences our view of the characters. We do not see the whole woman in any of the stories. The amount we do know varies, however, they all have their elusive elements. Likewise, all raise questions which cannot be answered with absolute certainty. Each woman provokes some level of fear or fascination. All offer the temptation to make them one kind of 'Good' woman or 'Bad' woman.

As a result of my study I have demonstrated that a more rounded response to characters like these women is possible as well as desirable. Popular culture may have got the dualism of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman from Christianity, but it develops it in its own ways. In the course of writing this piece of work the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman in culture has moved on. Another piece of work perhaps presents itself here. Where popular culture combines the extremes of the 'Good' and 'Bad' woman into a 'bitch goddess'²³⁷ how does Christianity offer integration of the two rather than an inhuman hybrid?

In terms of ministering to women in the Christian community I believe the message is clear. We can equip ourselves with better knowledge about what the Bible really says. We can discuss the hard questions unashamedly. I believe we would find that the acknowledgement of the mysteries in these biblical women would help Christian women accept the complexities within themselves.

²³⁷ O'Grady (2003) p5.

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